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THE CHALLENGE

Life that dares send
A challenge to his end,
And when it comes, say, Welcome, friend!

Crashaw.

THE CHALLENGE

BY

HAROLD BEGBIE

AUTHOR OF "THE CAGE," ETC.

"To him that knoweth not the port to which he is bound, no wind can be favourable; neither can he who has not yet determined at what mark he is to shoot, direct his arrow aright." —S. T. C.

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THE CHALLENGE

CHAPTER I

FROM Wellington, where they had called him Agamemnon on account of his majestic size and a certain regal austerity of countenance, Blake Thornton went up to Cambridge with a reputation; and what Mme. Guizot said of a certain writer's style may be said of this reputation — *it was always good, and never better.* The boy was not father to the man, but was the man himself.

In person he was tall, lubberly, and sprawling; when he placed his hands in his pockets he forced them outwards till the cloth strained; when he collapsed in a chair he made it creak with the pressures and shovings of his huge back; when he thrust out his long legs he rubbed and jostled his shoes together as though the polish was a false quantity which annoyed him. The colour of his skin was a tone deeper than red-brick; the troubled iris of his eyes had the appearance of heat; the profile was handsome and commanding. With more energy in his face he would have suggested a soldier; with less, he might have passed for a poet.

He took a Second Class in Classics, and not having thought a day beyond his fourth year, and with no inclination to do anything in particular or to alter the least of his habits, he remained at Cambridge, and became a tutor. It was a manner of life that he found agreeable. He *was genuinely* interested in the past,

had the instinct of the library and the museum, and appreciated the desultory discipline of college existence, with its reading, healthy games, and manly companionships. He was fond of mountaineering, racquets, and beer. He played cricket and football, but never excelled. After two years of tutoring he was elected a Fellow of his college, and thither carried his books, his pipes, and his carpet-slippers from the bay-windowed rooms where he had lolled through so many peaceful hours and now at last had drifted into a destiny.

You may imagine that he was speedily marked down by the married ladies of the town whose grown-up daughters were beginning to cause anxiety. In the first place, it was the opinion of some excellent judges that his work on Hellenic Ideals, when it saw the light, would mortify Oxford and become a classic; while everybody in Cambridge was agreed that it needed only a woman's refining influence in his life to convert the handsome, untidy and unwieldy scholar into a practical, presentable, and useful gentleman. Many were the contriving and engineering eyes turned upon the unconscious Fellow, who, like the father of Frederick the Great, had *a laborious soul in a robust body,* and was content with each day as it came, so long as it brought no disturbance to the established order of his bad habits.

Eventually, however, he fell a victim to his own fatal indecision of mind. Unable to say whether he was Whig or Tory, divided between Unitarianism and Agnosticism, and somewhat troubled by the first whisperings of psychical curiosity, he contracted a sudden passion for ethnology and flung himself into a pursuit of this illuminating science with an ardour which had never characterised his love for Greek literature or his interest in the genius and history of the Hellenic people. He had reached that place in the life of an intelligent man

when it becomes almost a necessity to know something decided about the human race and its business in the spheres. It would have been a relief to his mind if he could have discovered satisfying proofs that no God existed and that life perished with the body. He only wanted to know something that was a fact, something on which he might rest the tired weight of a burdened mind, grown inconveniently, and against his will, inquisitive.

Now, the great ethnologist at Cambridge in those days was Professor Penrose, and at the house of this amiable and scholarly old gentleman, whither he frequently repaired for information and book-borrowing, Blake Thornton was more often than not received by the brilliant and profound daughter, Louisa Penrose, whose "Anthropological Primers" were just then beginning to sell almost with the pious regularity of Prayer Books and Hymnals.

She was but six-and-twenty years of age, the youngest of a large family, and the most cherished possession of her father outside his museum. If it would be straining language to say that she was pretty, or to assert positively that she had charm, at least one may say with perfect propriety that she had an engaging manner, and was not without the agreeable distinction of a scholar. She was a little faded, but fresh-coloured, with a complexion somewhat resembling the skin of a young pippin. Her eyes, which were small and too much on the surface for effect, were the pale and wistful blue of forget-me-nots. Her rather nice brown hair, combed off the forehead, was bound by a black velvet ribbon. She had thin arms, elegant hands, and feet whose beauty even an ugly shoe could not obscure. As for quantity, she was neither ponderous nor flimsy, but a pleasant compromise between the folio and the duodecimo. She was neither a phantom

of delight nor a stick; just a healthy, agreeable, and cultured specimen of University womanhood.

On three occasions the Professor and his daughter accompanied the athletic Blake Thornton to the mountains, once in England, once in Switzerland, and once in Italy. Louisa proved herself more resourceful than audacious in the higher flights of these expeditions, but she botanised so authoritatively on the lower slopes, and so luxuriously played the providence of the luncheon basket and the spirit kettle, that Agamemnon, munching radishes like a young horse at the morning manger, began to observe her with something new in his eyes, and even discovered himself of a morning interrupting the hazardous task of shaving his chin to finish the insistent and sentimental tune which somehow or another he had begun to hum during the razor's progress over his cheek.

He had heard some months before this profound psychological change, of a letter written by Professor Sidgwick in which these words occurred: "I sometimes feel, with somewhat of a profound hope and enthusiasm, that the function of the English mind, with its uncompromising matter-of-factness, will be to put the final question to the Universe with a solid passionate determination to be answered, which *must* come to something." This thought, expressed in terms so similar to his own measured and restrained manner of utterance, had quickened his imagination with something of passion which hitherto it lacked. He had carried it with him into the fields, beside the rivers, up to the gates of fen sunsets, and under the throbbing confusion of the stars — not with the agonising and breathless anxiety of a Pascal, but with the sturdy curiosity and interested wonder of a laborious soul in a robust body. He felt that perhaps it was true. He was almost inclined to believe that somewhere in the Universe there was an answer to the great

question-mark graven upon the surface of the earth by the passing centuries. At any rate, he was profoundly interested in the riddle.

But now, when he watched the palpable and familiar clothed with the golden exhalations of the dawn, or stood in the shadow of sad cypresses, gazing at stars that vibrated just above the burning snow of mountain crests, it was neither of immortality nor the function of the English mind that he thought, but of a warm tenderness in his own heart and the tones of a woman's voice that lingered there with the sense of sweetness.

It took him a year to make up his mind, a year in which ethnology lost its attraction, psychical inquiry became a boredom, and he returned to the Greeks with the chastened emotion of a wandering sheep and a lost lover.

They were married during a long vacation, went to Scotland for their honeymoon, and returned to take up their residence in a small house on the sunniest side of Hills Road. Louisa brought into the exchequer £300. Blake Thornton possessed, beyond his University income of some £500, a small annuity bequeathed to him by his father, which fluctuated, as he put it, between the autumnal perquisites of a butler and the salary of a schoolmaster. They could do very well.

A year after their marriage came the bewildering and appalling phenomenon of a baby. To Mrs. Thornton the event was a relief but not a pleasure; to Agamemnon it was nothing but an unqualified disaster. For the first time in his life something had definitely happened. And something for which apparently, although in the nature of a bolt from the blue, he himself was more or less directly responsible. He went from his unfinished manuscript of Hellenic Ideals to the cradle of this infant, and said to himself: "*This is* my doing; this is my work;

I have not only commenced author, I am author." And he returned to his manuscript with the feelings of a man who comes staggering straight from howling seas and felon winds into the hush and stillness and stifling diminution of a shuttered parlour.

Everything was changed by this baby. The habits of a lifetime, the atmosphere of his house, the folds and creases of his thought, his relationship with every man and woman he met in the streets — *everything* was changed, shaken, and disorganised. And by the time he had steadied his feet to the cataclysm and accustomed his lungs to the tempest, another baby was in the cradle, and the first was rummaging in his wastepaper-basket and licking the lacquer from the fire-irons in his study. And even while he still reeled under this fresh buffeting from the malicious gods, a third blow was dealt, and he beheld the second baby on the hearth-rug of his study, while he was perpetually iterating and reiterating prohibitions to the articulate first. And these three babies were all girls.

He escaped from the horror of his home, it was his wife's wish, during the vacations, and endeavoured to forget in the mountains, what as a bachelor he had never known:

> The weariness, the fever, and the fret
> Here, where men sit and hear each other groan.

The words of Keats recurred often to his mind, and when he heard a bird singing, nightingale or not, he would exclaim with a sardonic irony, grinding his teeth, "No hungry generations tread thee down!" It was as if Providence had got him on the run and was now pursuing him with the accumulated chastisements incurred by his indolent adolescence. He applied to this chastise-

ment the words with which Matthew Arnold had described mental strife —"Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest." And when he returned from Grindelwald on one occasion to find himself the father of a fourth child, and this time a son, he abandoned hope, and convinced that he was now doomed for a dozen at least, he set himself to bear the burden of paternity with the resignation of a broken ox. "Go on!" he cried, when the next baby appeared, "hang out another hatchment." Every child was a nail in his coffin, and he declared that his house echoed for him now with the carpentry of an undertaker.

It was not so bad as he expected. The quiver stood at eight arrows, and merciful nature at last relieved him of anxiety that another should be added.

The family now lived in a larger house in Madingley Road, for which they paid a little over a hundred pounds and the weekly bills became steadily more depressing. Mrs. Thornton, from the theses of a speculative anthropology, turned courageously to the facts of an actual race problem, and proved herself as practical and persuasive in the one, as she had been lucid and engaging in the other. It was the inflexible determination of this rigid soul that the smells of nursery teas should never penetrate the study and the drawing-room, that the academic and literary tone of the house should not be broken by the discordances of the cradle; in a word, that eight lively and vigorous children should make no difference in the household of a retired scholar.

Skilful as she was in this particular, the dear lady could not make the bills of the shoemaker, the milliner, the grocer, and the chemist, a budget of sterility. Poverty settled on the roof-tree and brooded on the affairs of this household. A general shabbiness appeared along the window-sills and wainscots, in the panels of doors,

on the wall-papers, in carpets and furniture, and on the stairs — a dingy mournfulness, like a forgotten dog's-eared leaf of a neglected book.

Agamemnon, no longer able to take his ease in the mountains, forced even to curtail his uses of beer and tobacco, contracted an obfuscating melancholy which intermittent indigestion developed into an unmistakable irascibility of temper. He took to reading the newspapers — a dangerous thing in meditative scholars — and would express violent opinions on politics with contemptuous animadversions on statesmen of the highest rank. As for religion, like Turgot, *il jeta ce masque*, and took a savage pleasure in ridiculing the millinery excesses of the ritualists and what he described as the pinchbeck Cromwellianism of the Spurgeonites. He would have grown fat, but for his wearing indigestion and his mania for long and exhaustive pedestrianism.

The little boy, King Thornton, might have saved him; but when he endeavoured to teach the child his letters, not without a certain movement of affection stirring in the troubled depths of his heart, he found him so incredibly stupid and so vexatiously satisfied with natural ignorance, that he retired altogether from the circle of domesticity and lived the life of St. Simon Stylites in his undusted study, going through examination papers, preparing lectures, and occasionally adding a thousand laborious words to his great work on Hellenic Ideals.

King Thornton was glad to be rid of his father, not only because instinctively he disliked this monstrous melancholy Lubber Fiend with sprawling legs, blazing eyes, and jungle of moustache, but because he was so perfectly contented with the governance of his eldest sister. Separated from her only by three and a half years, he felt himself by virtue of his sex to be on a

sufficient equality with her to conclude lessons whensoever he desired and to command her companionship in whatsoever game happened to hit his fancy at a particular moment. And as for Laura, this angelic eldest sister was so enchanted by boy-brother, so head over ears in love with him, that nothing pleased her more than to do exactly what he wished.

The eldest child of a large family in modest circumstances seldom experiences the joy and felicity of a child's sovereignty, particularly if the sex is not of the inheriting gender. Laura was scarcely conscious of existence, before she found herself in a position of responsibility. She was required to amuse one sister, watch a second, and rock the cradle of Master King, the third. If she ever possessed doll, top, or Noah's Ark — she only employed these articles of disport to keep her charges quiet. Nothing was ever quite her own. It never wholly seemed to her that she possessed anything — not even an existence. She did not ever feel, as Hegel would put it, her particularity tremble within her. Hers was a distracted and dismembered childhood, fragments of which may yet be picked up in the best parts of the lives of her brothers and sisters.

At the age of eighteen she began to be aware of something stirring within her which a young poet would perhaps have defined as the throes of temperament. She was conscious of unrest, of impatience, of dissatisfaction. Her favourite authors began to grow tedious. Time moved for her with a brake on the wheels. She wanted something to happen. Her blood pricked in her veins. It was only by an effort she could sit still. And when she moved it was without purpose — seeking she knew not what, desiring only that an end or at least an interruption should come to a monotony which stretched and screwed her nerves.

She had no consolations, real or artificial, in religion. She had been taught nothing about Christianity, except the Bible, which she read along with other mythologies, and which she so often heard her father and his friends discuss with no indication that the matter was important. She could not play the piano with satisfaction to herself — she had never been carefully taught; and from the romances of Walter Scott, the novels of Jane Austen, and the poetry of Southey and Tennyson, she had drifted into the literature of the pre-Raphaelite Movement without understanding in the least what it meant. Quite unconsciously she had imbibed from this literature a feeling of weariness, depression, and morbid vacuity.

Then, too, when she should have been playing vigorous games or rambling in the meadows and woods, she had been kept at home to amuse one of the younger children, to help her mother with the mending, even to copy out some frightfully interwoven pages of her father's manuscript. She said to her father on one occasion, after listening to a long discussion about the Greeks, "What is the meaning of *the joy of life?*" He raised his eyebrows, regarded her with a look which almost reached real interest, and then, showing his teeth, "A large income and a good digestion," he answered.

She was at this time of her life more remarkable for the extraordinary delicacy of her complexion than for fineness of features or beauty of expression. The profile was entirely without distinction, owing chiefly to an unmistakable pugginess — the nose brief, somewhat thick, and inclined to an upward curve: the lips full and complaining: the chin round to the degree of heaviness. It was what some women call a stocky face. But so amazingly soft, warm, and tender was the texture of her skin, and so splendid with lustre the rich masses of her brown hair, that one not only forgot to discover the

faultiness of her features, but by closer observation came to find in that very faultiness a certain mysterious and haunting charm. It was as if Nature hinted at some wonderful secret in this incongruity of her handiwork — imperfection visible but powerless in a masterpiece. The small dark-coloured and slumbrous eyes, with their thick lashes and level brows, had that pretty strain of half-closing lids which is characteristic of myopia; the small mouth, too small for beauty, expressed in the deep carmine of the pursed lips a petulance and a pride which were not without attraction because so natural and troubled. If there was no loveliness of expression in the young face, at least there was nothing of artificiality and nothing of self-satisfaction. It was the face of a child disturbed by womanhood; the harassed but exquisitely innocent face of a spirit peering into an environment not realised and everywhere perplexing. And in vain to her one would have cried:

> Thou little child, yet glorious in the might
> Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
> Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
> The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
> Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?

It was not imposed upon her from without, this puzzled mind and heart of unrest; it was the life of her blood, the turn of her temperament, the hue of her soul.

The loss of her brother when he went to school had been her first and sharpest experience of sorrow, the beginning of a knowledge within herself that everything was not right in life. She had given him almost everything in her heart, and the lack of this idol, the disappearance of this altar, had plunged her into a miserable desolation. With her younger sisters she had but little in common. They were bright, vivacious, quarrelsome, and enthusiastic creatures, most of them with the wistful

blue eyes of their mother, but with a prominence and a fire behind them which gave energy and audacity to their more or less pretty faces.

Laura was never quite at ease with them. She could school them, superintend them, help them; but she could never play with them, never become one of them. If she went for a walk with one of these pig-tailed and short-skirted young people she found that there was nothing to say; their thoughts were different.

She was troubled by many things, and with no one could she discuss these problems. In her nature there was an instinctive modesty, an inherent delicacy of feeling, but she saw on the hoardings of the town, in shop windows, and in the pages of illustrated papers such pictures as made her think that the whole world was abandoned to shameless impurity. Perhaps her very first initiation into woman's knowledge came from a fashion-plate, in which a number of ogling and leering women were represented in chemise, corsets, and stockings with elaborate garters. This picture seemed to tear down the veil of her innocence. Afterwards she saw that such pictures were common, and realised from comic-operas, from milliners' windows, from photographs of fashionable women, and from coloured posters on the walls that dress had some subtle connection with sex and that sex was a matter of almost central interest to humanity.

Her curiosity was aroused, and she began to read books to discover the truth about life — the truth which her parents withheld from her.

One day Mrs. Thornton came to her when she was reading in the drawing-room, and said, "We must take more pains with your clothes. I don't know, I'm sure, how we are going to do it, but we must try. I've been thinking things over. The books this week are dreadful. It is time you were married."

The girl looked quietly up at her mother, and half closing her eyes, a warmth of colour slowly suffusing her face and neck, said rather nervously, "But I don't want to be married; I don't know what it means; I don't think I should like it."

To which the poor lady made answer, "Ah, me! Here's a fresh trouble added to life. I suppose there's no end to a mother's troubles. I shall have to teach you what marriage is; and after you, there'll be all the others; and before that's over and done with, I shall have to begin nursing your babies. Well, well, life is a martyrdom!"

"Wouldn't it be better, then, if I didn't marry at all? I could help you."

"My dear child, you have got six sisters pressing up behind you, and until you're out of the way and off our hands, they'll be a burden to us — a ruinous burden. No. You must get married, and as soon as possible. It's for your own advantage. If one of the younger ones by any chance should become engaged before you, almost to a certainty you would be passed over for the rest of your life. That would be misery for you and misery for us. A spinster at the head of a family of girls becomes like a lighthouse — a warning! It isn't as if we were well-off. We simply cannot afford to keep you all. So, for your sisters' sakes and for your own, too, we must find you a husband. I'll look about. And in the meantime I think I'll write to your Aunt Isabella at Bath. Perhaps she would give you some of Mabel's dresses."

CHAPTER II

BEFORE Mrs. Thornton had found time to look about her Laura flung the whole household into a consternation by suddenly going off one day, apparently without reason of any kind, into a fit of hysterics. What she was crying for, nobody could discover; what she was laughing about, she could not have said herself; all she could tell the inquiring and surrounding members of her family — one with a sponge, another with eau-de-Cologne, a third with vinegar, and a fourth with smelling-salts — was that she *wanted* to cry. There she lay, with her face buried in the cushions of the dining-room sofa, laughing and crying, crying and laughing, the beautiful young body shaken by convulsive sobs, the lovely hair disordered and wild, the flushed cheeks, the white neck, and the twitching hands burning with heat; and while the sisters said to each other, staring and grinning, "What on earth can be the matter with her?" and her mother knelt at her side inquiring, "Laura, darling, what is the matter? — something is troubling you — tell me!" — the usually calm and quite placid Miss Laura could only reply, "I don't know; I don't know; I want to cry."

It was soon over, and she rose from the cushions, laughing, blushing, and ashamed. With one trembling hand she rubbed a damp handkerchief backwards and forwards across her nose, with the other she kept forcing back the tousled hair from her rosy face; and standing now on one foot and then on the other, throwing back her head, laughing self-consciously, she looked from one to the other and apologised for being such an uncommon

duffer. She would not hear of a doctor. She vowed that she never felt better in her life. She implored her mother not to say anything more about it. And finally, asking one of the staring and grinning sisters if she would go for a walk with her, escaped hastily from the room to bathe her eyes, arrange her hair, and prepare for the outing.

Two or three weeks after this shocking behaviour, King Thornton returned for the Easter holidays. He had acquired a somewhat swaggering and aggressive manner at school which every day more and more galled his father. Blake used to watch his son at meals with a curious and waiting observation. One day he corrected him for a trivial exaggeration; on the second he pounced suddenly upon an untruth; and on the third he interrupted a boastful narrative of the headlong youngster with a cruel gibe. "If you are not careful," said he "you will become like Meno, who, Xenophon tells us, became so practised in lying that he looked upon people who told the truth as vulgar and boorish."

Mrs. Thornton exclaimed, "Oh, Blake dear, that's a little unkind."

And King, who had flushed scarlet, pushed his plate away from him, lounged back in his chair, and said in a sulky voice, "He's always nagging at me."

The things on the table jumped and rattled with a sudden and terrible blow from the fist of Agamemnon. "Sit up, sir!" he commanded; and as King glared at him and then very slowly and nonchalantly began more or less to do what he was told, Agamemnon arose in his wrath, took one nerve-shaking stride towards King, and would infallibly have administered then and there a fearful chastisement but for another and most providential fit of hysterics on the part of Laura.

King came up to her bedroom in the evening, and said

to her, "I say, thanks awfully, old girl, for trying to create a diversion. He lammed me after all, though. Chucked me about the study like a beastly footstool, and hit me on the ears till I was jolly near blind. Never mind, it's over now; and I'll be even with him one day, you see if I'm not. He's no more right to be a father than—. But never mind the old beast; what about you? I heard them say that you would have to go away somewhere. Is it true?"

Laura had heard nothing. The doctor had come and asked her a great many questions, those of them which did not seem to her entirely irrelevant being horribly indelicate, and he had told her to keep in bed "and count the cracks in the ceiling." That was all.

"I say, what is the matter with you really?" asked King, scrutinising her oddly.

She smiled, looked away, and said, "I don't know."

"Girls are jolly funny things," he said, after a pause. "But I do hope they won't send you away," he added quickly. "Why don't you tell them you're all right now?—it'll be perfectly beastly for me if you go away. Hullo! Someone's coming. I must be off. Governor sent me to bed! Good night, old girl."

What the doctor had said was this: Laura must be taken out of herself. She must be encouraged to go about, see people, and take an interest in things. She must have exercise, but not in the form of long and lonely walks; she should play games with people of her own age. But before everything else, she must be toned up, and the best way to tone her up would be for her mother to take her to Margate. Two or three weeks at Margate would prepare her for the more active and vigorous life which was essential for her health—"essential," said the doctor, "for her health, age, and temperament."

So mother and daughter departed one beautiful morn-

ing at the end of April for Margate, and settled themselves down on the first floor of a comfortable little bay-windowed house at the Cliftonville end of the town, to which they had been most confidently recommended by a lady in Cambridge. "Mrs. Flynn, the woman who keeps it," said this good lady, "was cook in the family of some very rich people, and knows how things should be done."

It was all very nice and comfortable in this little house, the cooking far better, indeed, than anything Laura had ever experienced before, but there was one serious annoyance. Every sound from the room below was audible, and as the occupant was given to whistling, banging the piano, singing interminable songs, and apparently fighting with a menagerie of dogs, the strain on the two ladies threatened to become considerable.

They had scarcely seated themselves to tea on the first day of their arrival when all the stretched wires of the piano below came suddenly vibrating through the ceiling accompanied by a strident baritone voice, demanding at a rattle:

> "Don't you hear the general say
> Strike your tents and march away?
> He be dashed, and he be cursed,
> Whoever played the general first."

— and on and on it went, demanding each time with an ever-fresh emphasis of exasperation:

> "*Don't* you hear the general say
> Strike your tents and march away?"

— till what had seemed at first like a joke, became an irritation and an insupportable annoyance.

Suddenly the song ceased, the player whistled for a few minutes to wandering chords of the piano, and then plunged helter-skelter into:

"The sons of the Prophet are well known to fame,
And quite unaccustomed to fear,
But bravest of all was he of the name
Abdullah-Bulbul-Amir!"

— singing it to the familiar tune which is immortal only because it will not die.

"This is past all bearing," said Mrs. Thornton; "the creature will drive us mad. I shall speak about him when Mrs. Thingmebob comes to take away the tea-things. It's like being in a music-hall."

Laura laughed in her quiet way. The sea air and the jolly song seemed to go well together. She thought it must be rather splendid to be so exuberantly happy.

When Mrs. Thingmebob appeared, Mrs. Thornton spoke to her — quite nicely and agreeably; indeed, with an amused smile on her withered but fresh-coloured face, and an almost endearing graciousness in her voice.

"Oh, that's Mr. Philly!" said the cheerful landlady, with a smile that quite brightened the room and added a kind of glory to the human race — it was so universally benevolent. "Just listen to him! O, my poor pianner! But you mustn't mind him. I'll tell him to behave himself presently. He's as wild as can be — in some things only, mind you; but a body can coax him into 'most anything. He's the youngest of the five I lived with, Sir Thomas and Lady Syston, the great builders and contractors; he was little more than a child when I first went to them — such a dear little fellow, he was. And now he's in the Militia, working up for examinations, and going in for the Army, so he says; and whenever he feels a bit run down or wanting just a little quiet, you understand, he comes down to his old friend Mrs. Flynn."

"I expect," said Mrs. Thornton, smiling, "that it's for quiet he has come on this occasion."

And once more with a terrific crash, the loud pedal

down, and his voice like a bull, came the exasperating demand:

> "*Don't* you hear the general say
> Strike your tents and march away?"

"Oh, there," said the rubicund Mrs. Flynn, seizing the tea-tray and pretending to give it a good shake, "I'll go down and give it him proper; you see if I don't. But it's nothing up here. It isn't really. You ought to be downstairs in the same room with it. Enough to deafen you! But there"— with a vigorous wag of the head, two or three short steps with her feet, and another demonstration with the tray —"I'll go down and stop it at once. You see!"

"But not altogether, please," said Mrs. Thornton; "be careful to tell him we only ask for intervals of quiet."

The piano ceased suddenly; a mumble of voices reverberated under their feet; and then a silence so dismal after the late fanfare settled upon the house that Mrs. Thornton repented her of having interfered. "I do hope she has delivered my message properly," said the relenting lady. Laura, who was standing in the bay-window looking down the empty street towards green cliffs and the sea, began to laugh. "Do you know I rather liked all that row," she said, without turning her head. "Well, we'll send another message to-morrow; we'll ask him to give us an hour in the afternoon, and half an hour in the evening," said Mrs. Thornton. She was thinking that the young gentleman below came of a rich parentage and deserved consideration.

A door banged below. A shrill whistle rang through the house, followed by a scuttering of many paws and the excited barks of numerous dogs in the hall. Then

the house door opened, and Laura drew a little back from the window.

He was very like many a young man she had seen in Cambridge; but something in the freedom of his walk, the nape of his firm neck, and the colour of his fair hair, pleased her and made her blush. He carried a couple of books under his arm. At his heels trudged a lugubrious bull-dog very much down on the off foreleg. In front of him scampered three of the liveliest and whitest fox-terriers that ever gave war to rat and cat. He was wearing old flannel trousers and a sand-coloured Norfolk jacket that bulged in every pocket. He whistled as he walked, and the arm that was free of books swung with a heavy strength. He did not look up at the window.

Both ladies regarded him for a moment, and then, as if ashamed of herself, Mrs. Thornton turned back into the room and said briskly, "Come, this is not the way to tone you up; we will put on our hats, and go out for a walk before dinner."

Laura caught sight of him on the sands as she walked with her mother along the cliffs, but he did not now provoke her curiosity. It was her first experience of cliff and sea; and as she walked in that noble air with the rays of the setting sun gilding the fields, and the strong, delicious scents of the sea in her nostrils, she was conscious in her soul of something exceeding curiosity and excelling personality. He looked, too, so small and insignificant, lying there far beneath her on the yellow sands, an open book under his eyes, the bull-dog sitting at his feet, the terriers barking ridiculously at the breaking grey and foaming white of the waves. High above him, high above her, was the deep sky, blue in its infinite distance and cumbered with enormous clouds whose dull and sullen whiteness was edged with colour and splintered by fire. The green brow of the chalk cliffs stretched on

before her in a hundred curves; the floor of the sands extended far as the eye could see, and there, banking the horizon with iron-grey and plumes of dissolving snow, was the great ocean — ringing its everlasting music through the air. And that air, so cold, so wholesome, and so strong; masculine in power and force, godlike in its energy and joy — ah, how good to breathe it in through the nostrils, to hold it in the lungs, and then exhale it slowly through scarce-parted lips. She was like a wild thing — a satyr thrusting his face into wet bushes of scented flowers, a fawn whirling in a dance, a bacchante drinking nectar. She laughed softly to herself every now and then. "How splendid it is!" she exclaimed. The coldness which was like crystal on her brow and chin, and which she felt with joy through her clothes, ministered to some inarticulate craving of her senses and filled her with a most joyous exaltation. Her cheeks glowed, her eyes shone, she breathed like a young animal tasting the dawn. "Shall we walk faster?" she asked. "Why, are you cold?" asked the mother. "Oh, no; but it's like a sin to crawl!" "H'm, you're toning up quite nicely; come along then, we'll step it out; this is how life seemed to me before you were born."

They spent the evening over fashion papers, considering Laura's wardrobe. The advertisements in these papers seemed to the girl indecent and unhealthy.

Early the next morning she went out by herself, and walked along the cliffs in the direction of Kingsgate. It had rained in the night. The grass was drenched with a heavy dew; the plough-land on her right was like a sponge; the distant copses, leafless and brown, were shrouded in a bluish mist. On the earth and in the sky were patches and drifting masses of lilac-coloured haze. In spite of this moisture, the sun was warm and joyous, and the air was fresh, with a song in the wind. On one

side as she walked was the fine clangour of the sea, far below her; on the other, so beautiful that she smiled to it, the singing of skylarks, high above her.

She was conscious in herself of a movement towards joy. She was like a sinner hesitating to make a public surrender, like a prisoner fearing to make his dash for liberty. Without clearness of perception, she felt that her social environment was false and wrong, that she had only to break through it to find herself in a region of inexpressible joy. It was the spirit of spring surging through her young blood — that wave of revolt and creative passion which every year lifts creation out of the trough of winter, and on one vast single flood of rapture bears it into the pageant seas of summer. She was at unity with nature. She moved with all the primal forces of the universe, and responded in every pulse of her being to the elemental vibrations of existence. It was good to live. It was easy to live. There were no problems in her heart, no difficulties in her way. These things sufficed — the sun, the wind, the sea, the scents of the turned earth, the caress of the wet air, the song of the skylarks, and her own deep sense of well-being.

But even in this moment of natural exaltation, even in this mood of pervasive satisfaction and deep joy, she realised that it would not last, confessed to herself that however absurd and outrageous it might seem she would return to her old environment like a sheep to the fold. Like a prisoner she would gaze, without hope and without pleasure, towards the unknown and inexperienced fields of liberty and joy which she now glimpsed, which she now felt to be so near and real. She would have to go on as she had begun; no, not as *she* had begun, but as her life had been begun for her by others — by her father and mother, by European civilisation, by immemorial barbarism, by the only thing with a pedigree,

custom, by the first man who decided and divided and ordained.

She had no feeling that it was a wild thing for her to dream of liberty and joy; rather she was convinced of stupidity in accepting the circumstances of her life; nevertheless, she felt that the one — the foolish and the stupid — was inevitable; the other — the logical and delightful — impossible.

To go back to her mother and say, "I am sick of our crowded home, sick of tradesmen's books, linen-baskets, darning-needles, cookery-books, meals at regular hours, politics, history, science, and the Greeks; I want to be rid of all that; I want to be myself, a bigger self in a less complicated and far more simple universe; set me free and let me go"— to say this did not seem to her so mad a proposition as to return and say, "Shall I pour out the tea?" But she knew it was simpler to say the one; impossible to say the other.

When she walked up the road she saw her mother standing in the bay-window, reading a letter. The tall, thin, elegant figure in black; the small careworn face with its note of distinction and good-breeding; the pretty brown hair combed back so rigidly and bound so simply by a velvet ribbon — how familiar they were, and yet how lacking in something that creates affection and tenderness. She knew girls who adored their mothers. She had seen mothers and daughters together who were like lovers, who diffused about them some beautiful atmosphere of tenderness and grace. What was it, she asked herself, that her mother lacked, or perhaps she herself lacked? — that something which made their home only a house and their family life only an association?

Mrs. Thornton saw her before she reached the gate, and lowering the letter looked out from the window. "I hope you have not been overdoing it," she said. Then

she held up the letter, smiled, nodded, and whispered down with an air of mystery — "News! Aunt Isabella is interested." Her face grew serious at once, and she looked first towards the sea and then towards the sky, inquisitively and critically. "I'm not quite sure of the weather," she said dubiously; "I think it may rain."

At breakfast Laura learned that Aunt Isabella wished her to come on a visit to Bath in the summer; that she had sent some dresses and clothes to Cambridge which she hoped might be useful, and that she enclosed a cheque to buy Laura a couple of best frocks. "As for finding her a suitable husband in Bath," wrote this vigorous lady, who had just married her last daughter to a thousand a year, "I really don't know what to say; men, it seems to me, get more selfish and particular every year; the impulsive ones marry disreputable creatures from the theatres, the prudent ones marry none but heiresses, and the nice ones don't marry at all. I hear on all sides that mothers are now training their girls to get their own living, which sounds to me like a revolution, and *most* impractical, except for the plain ones. However, you may rely on me to do my best. There *is* one man I have in my eye for Laura, but I must see her first, and he's a little old, perhaps; but there's no hurry in any case. He doesn't get older, and he doesn't get caught."

The heavens darkened while they were eating their breakfast, and soon after Mrs. Flynn had cleared away down came the rain. They waited till eleven o'clock, and then donning waterproofs set out for a walk, following the cliff to the town for the sake of the asphalt paths.

"I suppose you won't want me to marry," said Laura, "if I don't care for the people who ask me?"

"My dear Laura, am I a monster? Hold your dress up a little more; it's dragging. Oh, dear! I never saw that puddle — tut, I've wetted my ankles. Mind where

you walk; the place is a network of ponds and lakes. As if I should ask you to marry a man you don't like! Without affection, marriage is a sordid disagreement. I could no more see you married to a man you detested than I could see you harnessed to a cart. At the same time — oh, dear! another puddle — I don't want you to be too fastidious. It is as possible for a girl to be hypercritical as it is for a reviewer of books. To cultivate in oneself the spirit of observation and discrimination is good — is life itself; but to develop the detective's ingenuity in discovering small things and remarking insignificant details — bad, very bad. You must avoid that. Don't look out for faults. Don't —"

"Mind! Another puddle."

"Don't accustom yourself to the feeling of one dwelling apart from life and sitting in judgment on humanity. There's only one judge, the historian. Give yourself more. Do you know what I mean? Surrender yourself to the world; be of the grand army; march with your fellow-creatures. When we get back to Cambridge I shall take you about with me. I fear it's my fault that you are rather reticent and self-centred; you haven't mixed enough with other people; I haven't had the time to take you. But now I mean to give you a whole year, as much of it as I can manage. And in a year you ought to find a husband. Next year it will be Olive's turn."

"I shouldn't care to marry a man very much older than myself," said Laura. She was watching the dance of the rain on the black and shining asphalt, which was streaming with wet.

"That must depend on the man. Some men of forty are younger and brighter than boys of twenty. And a seasoned man has many merits. I'm not at all sure that forty is not a very good marrying age for a man. In any case — my dear child, do hold your dress up —

you must not generalise and form opinions without experience. Preserve an open mind. Teach yourself to know that life is a continual education."

"I can't make out why it is an education. What for? Why is everybody waiting, and hesitating, and afraid to live? No one seems to be sure about anything. We mustn't even trust our natural instincts. All the philosophers talk about life as a discipline and an education. But why?"

"Because experience has taught us that it is difficult to live happily, and because it is mathematically certain that there are many ways of living wrongly, and only one way of living rightly."

"What is the one way?"

"Virtue."

"But, do you consider that—"

"Go on; don't hesitate."

"I was going to say, your life and father's life has been virtuous, but it doesn't seem to be particularly happy. I mean you are always worried about ways and means. We are all a drag to you. I don't think anybody who came and inspected our home would say it was particularly happy. I mean, there's always a struggle to live, isn't there?"

"That is merely a question of money. You are confusing two issues, the moral and the economical."

"I was thinking of life."

"But thinking loosely. The moral question is distinct from the economical, though they act and react upon one another. Our home is not so prosperous as other homes financed by larger incomes; but I should certainly say it was a happy home. What do you consider is unhappy in our life?"

"All I meant was, the struggle to live. It seems to spoil everything."

"I don't think so at all. You will marry, you will go out into the world, and you will enjoy yourself. Then, when you look back, you will see that your home life was a discipline and an education, fitting you to take your enjoyment safely and wisely."

"But my dear mother, you can't say that your married life is an enjoyment! Look how you've toiled for us all. Look how you've worried and contrived for us. We have made you a prisoner. You can't go out, you can't travel, you never have an hour that you can really call your own. Surely you don't look back on your childhood and —"

"Oh, of course, life has its responsibilities. To the end of our days, as I said before, we are educating ourselves. We never stop learning."

"Yes, but what's the good of educating ourselves so painfully, if we only die in the end? Why can't we just live and be happy? Why should we make a toil of life?"

"For the good of posterity."

"I really don't see," said Laura slowly, "why we should care for posterity if we ourselves don't see anything of the final end of things."

"That," said Mrs. Thornton, "is a law of our nature, and one which we share with the whole animal world. Besides, there is just the possibility that after death some part of us continues to exist — we don't know where, we don't know how — but consciousness of some kind may survive death. Science is working to discover the truth of this hypothesis. We must wait till she gives her judgment. And, in the meantime, we must obey the laws. One thing we must not do, you and I, is to catch our deaths in this pelting rain and on this sloppy asphalt. We will go back. Your hair, my dear, looks like a mermaid's!"

Laura glanced away from the melancholy bandstand,

the deserted green, the row of gloomy houses stan
back from the cliff, and turned her gaze towards the
A dense haze seemed to force the horizon into the
ground, the long jetty merged itself in the mist, anc
colour of the sullen waves was grey, lifeless, and
bidding.

CHAPTER III

As they entered the house loud and discordant noises of fighting dogs came to their ears. The sharp snarling and snapping, the fierce and high-pitched barking of terriers, clashed with the profound growling and booming bark of the bull-dog; and with these noises came the sounds of dragging furniture, falling and clattering fire-irons, and the laughter, the calls, and the movements of the inciting man.

They had finished luncheon, and were settling down to their books, when they heard the lodger below open his door and ascend the stairs, whistling a tune. The whistle stopped at the landing outside, there was a pause, and then a knock sounded on the panels.

"Come in," called Mrs. Thornton, placing her handkerchief in her book, and looking over her shoulder.

The door opened, and a smiling face appeared, followed diffidently by half a shoulder. "Forgive me," said the lodger, with a laugh, "but would you mind—"

"Won't you come in?" asked Mrs. Thornton. Her voice had the indulgent tone of a University lady entirely used to the vagaries of young men.

He came in, but stood near the door, which he did not close. Laura observed him out of her small eyes, with a smiling interest. His hair was of a sandy-red colour, and curled above the forehead and beside the temples; at the ears it was clipped so short as to look like specks of fire. His face was peppered all over with freckles, some of them large spots and brown as moles. He had pale eyes which were green and lively. The nose

was bony and strong at the bridge, with thick nostrils. He wore a slight moustache. As for his mouth, which was the best feature in a face otherwise merely young, coarse, and assertive, it seemed to Laura so refined and agreeable in its extreme flexibility, so humorous and merry in its good nature, that she could not observe it without pleasure and without a sense of attraction.

"You," inquired Mrs. Thornton, in her incisive way, with a sparkle of amusement in her eyes, "are the dog-fancier and piano-tuner who lives below?"

"No other," replied the young man, laughing. "And I've come to ask a favour."

He glanced at Laura out of the corners of his eyes, and then turned his gaze to the mother. "Would you mind," he asked, thoroughly apologetic and laughing, "considering the awful weather, if I vamped for half an hour? I'll do it as quietly as possible; but, of course, if it interrupts you or annoys you I won't do it at all. The truth is, I never can settle myself down to work until I've exhausted my physical energies, and I find a piano almost the best parlour-gymnasium in existence."

Mrs. Flynn had told him that the young lady overhead was a rare beauty. To Philly Syston such a statement was like a bugle-call. To be in the same house, and on a wretched melancholy day, with a pretty girl whom he did not know, was a torture to his soul and an irritation to his nerves. He made inquiries of the landlady, pondered the fact of Cambridge, and then finding it quite impossible to fix his attention on military tactics with this tantalising distraction in his mind, he had turned scout, yielded to impulse, and invented a natural excuse which gave him a passport to the beauty.

"Oh, of course, you must play; and sing, too, I hope," said Mrs. Thornton. And she went on very agreeably

to explain that her daughter had not been well, and that was the reason why the music, on their first arrival, had made her anxious. "I hope," she concluded, "that the landlady gave you my message properly."

"Oh, quite, I'm sure!" laughed Philly. "She came into the room, and said, 'Now you just stop that caterwauling at once, Master Philly; the lady upstairs says that if you don't, she'll send for the police and have you locked up as the Wild Man from Borneo.'"

"*That,*" smiled Mrs. Thornton, "was not my message!"

"But I'm awfully sorry to hear —"

"Won't you sit down?"

"Oh, may I? It's awfully kind of you. I was going to say, I'm awfully sorry to hear Miss Thornton has been ill. And this weather is bad luck for you. Margate's nothing without weather — neither the hub of the universe nor the inner circle of the underground railway. But given decent weather, there's really no place like it. My father has come here now every year since I don't know when. I love the place. I was at school here till I went to Winchester; I know every inch of it; I've seen it grow from a kind of Early Victorian and Charles Dickens watering-place to its present unfortunate resemblance to a London suburb. But nothing can really spoil it, especially out of the season. It's the air that makes Margate — and the cliffs, the jolly chalk cliffs, the sands, the walks, and places like Kingsgate and St. Peter's."

He rattled away in this manner, and ere Mrs. Thornton reminded him that he had a serious examination before him, he had established a pleasant relation of intimacy with the two ladies. Winchester had greatly helped in this matter. "You were at Winchester?" she had asked; and from that much had followed. One or two of his best friends had been known to Mrs. Thornton at Cam-

bridge, and his housemaster was no other than a former schoolfellow of her husband's at Wellington. Therefore, it was not difficult for him to suggest that, if the weather cleared after tea, he should be allowed to show the ladies the field-way to St. Peter's. The weather did clear, and although they found the field-paths too slippery for walking, they made their way down to the sands by a gap, and with the noisy dogs spent a very agreeable hour by the waves.

The next day increased the friendliness of this acquaintanceship, and the following day was marked for a long walk to Broadstairs along the cliff. But on the night before this excusion Mrs. Thornton developed a cold from wet ankles on the asphalt, and when Philly Syston asked, with a rueful face, if the walk must be postponed — the weather was glorious that morning and Mrs. Flynn had cut the anchovy, sardine, brawn, and cheese sandwiches that his soul loved — the indulgent lady, whose eyes were watery and the tip of whose nose was cherry-coloured — agreed that Laura and the young man should go as far as Kingsgate together. "I certainly don't wish her to catch my cold," she concluded. Philly doubled into the town and returned with a bottle of smelling-salts which he declared never failed to cure his mother's colds — an attention which Mrs. Thornton thought very pleasant and charming. Then the two young people set out on their walk, Philly carrying brown-paper parcels of provender. Mamma, with the smelling-salts at her nose, watched them from the bay-window go down the street and strike across the cliff. "I wonder!" she said to herself. Then the thought of a long engagement made her feel chill. She turned back into the room, took her book, and sneezed three times, violently. "Laura is right," she reflected; "life is complicated, difficult, and troublesome. But she oughtn't to

think so. She ought to discover it for herself later on, when it's too late to rebel."

The dogs provided a topic of conversation. He was the proud and loving Boswell of those delightful animals, and related their biographies with a racy enthusiasm. Each dog had its own character, its own temperament. As they walked along in the morning air he discoursed of his dogs, and she listened with smiles and little subdued ripples of appreciative laughter. Over this bridge of dogs he passed naturally from the kingdom of the kennel to the sphere of human life. London, he declared, was a miserable place for dogs, and for that matter a miserable place for man; and when he found that she had never been to London he dropped dogs to tell her about dances and dinners, restaurants and theatres, clubs and supper-rooms, shop-windows, and crowded streets.

"It's all right for a few weeks," he said; "but unless a man is a fop, it soon begins to bore. You ought to see lean, lanky, long-necked women in a drawing-room posturing and adoring round a hairy German or a weasel-faced Pole who plays the fiddle or bangs the piano; it would make you sick. I like a woman to be a woman," he said, with an energetic laugh; "especially an English woman. By gad, the best English woman is a flyer: topping: nothing to touch her. But when the second-raters start imitating the French, it's beastly. Don't you agree?"

She had felt at the beginning of this walk a certain disordering nervousness, conscious of inexperience, and excited by novelty. In Cambridge she had occasionally walked side by side with a reverend senior of the male sex, and sometimes in a room full of other people she had talked for a few minutes with young men, most of them rather pedantic and pompous. But now she was alone with a vigorous and jolly young man, walking side

by side with him along a deserted cliff, and with nothing in front of her but hours of his companionship. So long as he discussed dogs she had felt more or less able to keep pace with this new experience, but directly he began to expatiate on women she was aware of a new element in her adventure. It seemed to her that she had got suddenly out of her depth, and yet the feeling of insecurity and danger was pleasant; she wanted him to go on in this vein.

"I suppose the women in Cambridge," he asked, "are all furiously clever? I can't say I think much of the blue-stocking."

She laughed softly. "I don't think they know very much more than other people."

"Ha! Exactly!" he exclaimed, with high approval. "That's the whole point. That's exactly what I say. Put one of those women to the facts of life, and where is she? Jolly well nowhere! I don't believe in education a bit. What on earth does it matter to us about the Greeks and the Romans? And mathematics, geometry, and all that — very good and useful things for an engineer, no doubt, but perfectly futile for ordinary people. Don't you agree? All that education ought to do is to fit people for life. There's no doubt about it."

"I like reading," she said, "don't you?"

"Oh, rather. So long, of course, as it's enjoyable reading. I don't believe in fag. I don't believe in making a toil of anything. If a man likes reading Homer, or Virgil, or a Book of Euclid, or the catalogue of a museum, by all means let him; but don't let him force it down the throats of other people. The thing is to live. Everybody has his own life to look after, and nobody has any business to spoil it for him. I don't mean to let anybody spoil my life for me. I mean to enjoy myself. Don't you?"

He turned and looked at her.

She glanced away from him, and said, "Everybody seems to have a different idea about that."

"About what?"

"Enjoyment."

"Some people are short-sighted and colour-blind," he laughed indulgently; "but I don't think the human race is in much doubt as to the best way to get a good time out of life."

"No work and plenty of money?" she asked, with a smile.

"Not a bit of it!" he answered sturdily. "Plenty of work, but the right kind of work. Not too much money, but just enough to see one through without worry. The very rich and the very idle are the most miserable people on the face of the earth. Don't you believe what they say in books. If a person hasn't got plenty of work, he's always breaking his shins over something; and if he has got too much money it becomes his master — he gets suspicious of everybody, fancies every Government is going to the deuce, and can't sleep without dreaming of the Money Market."

He went on to unfold his gospel of life with a sure confidence and an impatient dogmatism. The gymnasium, he said, was more important than the class-room. People must have strong bodies. Temperament, and all that, depended chiefly on a good digestion. He had no faith in parsons as professors of morality. The doctor was the man. Young fellows nowadays weren't half so religious as their fathers had been; but they didn't drink whisky day and night, they didn't fugg in club smoking-rooms, and they didn't go howlers on the turf. They keep themselves fit, he contended: they do what they like, but what they like is natural, and they don't overdo it. "I like meat and drink," he said, "but I don't make a

beast of myself, because it spoils me for polo and boxing and hunting; I like smoking, but I don't let it spoil my wind; and," he concluded, with a merry laugh, "I adore beautiful women, but I wouldn't let Cleopatra herself make a fool of me."

She felt that these views chimed with the fine air, with the smile of the sea, with the joy of the sky, with the delight of her body rejoicing in swift exercise. She laughed with him as he came to an end.

"Well, you'd really be surprised," he said, "how some fellows do let a pretty woman twist 'em round their fingers." And he told stories of lurid and tragic ruin. One man he himself had met several times, as good a chap as you could wish to meet, a foot soldier, a man with a real future before him — in prison, penal servitude, ruined for life, and all for a woman.

"But why do they do it?" she asked, puzzled and attracted.

"Oh, some men are like wax in the hands of a woman," he answered.

"Why do the women want to ruin them?"

"They don't; all they want is money."

"I don't understand."

"Well, a woman attracts a man; she flatters him, pets him, flirts with him, and all that; and then, when he's fairly hooked, she begins to get out the gaff for his money. Some men will beg, borrow, steal, and forge to supply a Sappho's demands."

"But —"

"You'd be surprised how many girls in society play this kind of game."

"Ladies?"

"Rather! — the real flyers. Gambling begins it. They get into debt, and then —! Well, better not inquire. Racing and baccarat are sending more girls to

the devil than anything else. If ever I marry! But I'm not likely to. Not just yet, at any rate!"

"I can't understand what you've been telling me," she said, with real and earnest interest. "I should have thought girls who could afford it would like to travel, and like to have beautiful houses and gardens. I can't see how they can like going in crowds to see horse-races, and sitting up till midnight playing cards. And gambling for money! I thought only men did that."

"You're very lucky not to know anything about the smart women, as they call themselves," he said soberly, almost paternally. "Nice women keep clear of them. But the worst of it is, so many of the nice women are rather frigid and tedious. They're apt to be clever, and cold, and artificial. It's not often, Miss Thornton, one meets a girl like you."

"Like me!" She was genuinely astonished, genuinely pleased.

"Yes, like you. Thundering pretty, healthy as a young fawn, full of the joy of life, and good!"

She laughed; she blushed. For a moment it was as if she walked on air.

"Directly I saw you," he said, "I realised the type."

She laughed again.

"You walk so splendidly, hold yourself so well. It's good to look at you."

She turned her head and glanced at him out of her mysterious eyes, wondering.

"That's not fair!" he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?"

"You could so easily make me make a fool of myself."

She could not understand.

"Don't make me serious," he said.

"I really don't know what you mean."

"I don't believe you do. That's why you are so delicious."

"What *do* you mean?" she asked, laughing with a little tone of scorn.

"Shall I tell you?"

"If you like. I really don't understand what you mean."

"Perhaps I'd better not. Directly conversation becomes serious it becomes dangerous. The thing is to keep it lively. Let's be lively! Shall we?"

"I am lively. At least, I think I am."

"You are perfectly charming; don't worry about yourself. The only danger is that you are *so* charming, so *fizzing,* if you will forgive the word, that unconsciously you are apt to make me serious. And if I did become serious, really serious, it would be tragic."

"Oh, you say things that I can't understand! You see, I don't know anything about the world. I've always lived in one place, and met the same kind of people. I've never heard anyone talk as you talk. It's awfully interesting. I enjoy it tremendously. It's like an exciting book. But I wish you'd go on telling me about people in London, and not — well, not say things that I can't understand, and can't answer. There's a heap of things in my mind I should like to ask you."

"What are they? — tell me."

At that moment the curve of the cliff brought them into view of Kingsgate, and she exclaimed with pleasure at the sight of the little village.

"You must ask me things at luncheon," he said; "we'll lounge here for an hour, and then we can discuss life on the way back. Will that suit you?"

Quite impulsively, for she was very happy, she said, "I shall like it *tremendously.* I can't tell you how I'm enjoying myself. Isn't it splendid — the sea, the walk,

everything? Oh, I love this little place. It reminds me of an old tale I used to read to my brother, when he was a small boy; I can't remember its name, but I think it was by Captain Marryat. Aren't the smells good? And look at that old fisherman — isn't he exactly like Mr. Peggotty?"

They descended by a narrow and broken path edged by grass to sea-level, and while the dogs raced to the waves, Philly spoke to a group of fishermen, all of whom appeared to know him well and to be wonderfully glad to see him. He made arrangements with them for a tarpaulin and some ginger-beer, and then whistling his dogs, led the way to the other side of the cliff. Before they were at the top a fisherman drew alongside, bearing a tarpaulin over his shoulder, and carrying a basket not only with glasses, ginger-beer bottles, and a corkscrew, but containing a scarlet lobster, plates, and napkins. "We thought you wouldn't say no to a lobster!" he said, smiling. He talked to Philly about his father and mother and "the young ladies," and in answer to questions thanked God that his missus and the little ones were fine.

The tarpaulin was spread on the down in a quarter where Kingsgate Castle somewhat sheltered them from the wind, and on this solemn cloth Philly gratefully dropped Mrs. Flynn's brown-paper parcels and some oranges which he disgorged from his pockets, while the fisherman set out the contents of the basket.

"I'll come up for the things, Master Philly, in about an hour, then?"

"That'll do fine."

"Thank you, sir."

To Laura that picnic, *une egoisme à deux personnes,* was an experience almost of rapture. To begin with, there was the freshness and vigour of spring in the air;

then, there was the good sea to look at; then, she was ravenously hungry; then, the lobster was delicious; and then, she was alone with a man who provoked her curiosity and revealed to her a new, unsuspected and exciting if rather frightening disposition in her own consciousness.

The dogs stretched themselves on the smooth grass at a respectable distance from the picnic. They neither begged for food nor appeared to want any. With dry and curling tongues protruding from wet mouths, the white teeth and the pink and chocolate-coloured lips shining in the sun, they panted and gasped, and blinked at little ships moving like so many rabbits over the smooth sea with a spurt of white foam at the rudders.

Philly talked about the food. "Eaten in the open air," he said, "nearly everything is good. Especially bread and cheese. You never get the essence of a thing's flavour except in the open air. The silly old fellow with a bald-head, waxed moustaches, and a rimmed eyeglass, who fancies himself an improvement on Lucullus and takes his grub in a crowded restaurant, is the biggest humbug alive. Think of the different smells conducting a kind of silent concerto round his table — flowers, millinery, livery with brass buttons, tobacco, fish, bird, sauces, fruit and all the rest of it — how the deuce can he possibly taste his own particular dishes? The epicure of a restaurant amuses me. Then, he's pathetic. He's at the end of things. And what an end! By George, I'd rather be an old fisherman, or an old peasant, or an old navvy any day."

She asked a great many questions about restaurants in London. She was even curious about the expense of things. It shocked and it pleased her to learn that people would spend eighteen or twenty shillings on a bottle of wine. "And ginger-beer is only tuppence!" she laughed. "And isn't doctored," he said. "But,

mind you," he added, with a smile, watching her good-humouredly, "I'm perfectly certain that you are dying to go to London and dine at one of those places!"

"Yes, I should like to see them," she confessed.

"You'd like them!"

"No, I don't think so. Only for an experience," she answered. "I should like to see everything. I should like to know all about that kind of thing. But it isn't my idea of happiness."

"What is?" he asked, handing her an orange which he had peeled and quartered to look like a water-lily.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "I think it's something inexpressible, locked up and deformed in the word Freedom. Something big — big like this sea! But I don't know." She looked down at the orange, a deeper red for the white of her hands. "How pretty!" she said. She held it away from her, and touched the languorous quarters with the tips of her fingers, and smiled at it. She glanced towards him. "I feel I shall never discover the extent of your accomplishments."

"I expect I appear to you a terrific fellow! What?"

"You know things." She began to eat the orange.

"And yet I'm a perfect greenhorn compared with most fellows of my age."

"Are you?"

"I've never lost my boy's first love for the Gym," he said; "and a man who goes in for boxing and fencing and physical exercise generally has neither the time nor the inclination for what other chaps call Life. You'd be surprised what a lot of fellows there are in the service who are Galahads and Philip Sidneys — not saints, I mean, but wholesome and straight. Oh, they flirt and all that, some of them, at least; but there's no harm in that. Given a pretty girl and a convenient situation, who wouldn't have a fling?" He laughed and looked

at her, full in the eyes. "You wouldn't blame a man for that, would you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I know I shouldn't blame the girl," he said quietly.

She shook her head and turned her eyes to the sea, away from him.

"Your idea of Freedom," he said; "doesn't that include a little judicious flirtation?"

She laughed, but said nothing.

"Flirtation," he said, "is a girl's University. She never graduates spinster of arts till she has exhausted that little rose-scented book of dark corners and moonlight sonatas!" He laughed, and produced pipe and tobacco pouch from his pocket.

The orange was a mercy. There was a commotion in her brain. She found that her heart was beating with a fluttering excitement, that her breathing was disordered and wild. It was with fingers which she could not prevent from trembling that she dismembered the last quarters from the orange.

"You will have to see a great deal of men," he said, "before you choose the one. Every girl should. But you in particular. It would be frightful if you made a mistake."

She could not trust herself to speak.

"A wise mother," he went on, and she began to smile, "ought to let her daughters see the whole of life before they choose a husband. A girl doesn't stand a chance unless she has met all sorts and conditions of men. She doesn't know. She can't judge. It's like turning a little lamb loose in a pack of wolves."

To her great relief — and yet with this instant feeling of relief there was an undertone of regret for the interruption — she heard Philly announce the arrival of the fisherman. She got up at once, and walked towards

the dogs, calling them by name, and stooping down to stroke and pat them when they came to her.

A few minutes afterwards he approached with a lighted pipe. "It is time we went back," he said, and they faced homewards. The fisherman was ahead of them.

He asked her if she would like to see the Smuggler's Cave, but she refused. He pressed her to let him get her a cup of tea at the Captain Digby Hotel, but she refused. Something warned her not to tarry, not to prolong this duet, which was so delightful and so exciting.

"I want to ask you a question," he said, as they turned inland at the first Gap. "I hope you won't think me rude. It's only that I'm awfully interested in you. Do you mind?"

She laughed nervously. "I don't know what you're going to say."

"Well, you needn't answer if you think I'm presumptuous. But — tell me, now — are you fond of any one man — particularly fond, I mean?"

"No!" she burst out, with a glad and cheerful laugh. "I don't know any men. I haven't thought about anything like that."

"No one has kissed you?"

"Of course not!" she answered, with a nervous effort to be scornful.

"Well, all I can say is this," he said, with energy. "I jolly well envy in advance the first man who does kiss you."

"Oh! I wish you wouldn't talk like that!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"But, why not, why not, why not? Sweet lady, do you imagine that you have not come into the world to kiss and be kissed? I assure you, you've got no other

mission. That's what nature made you for. Oh, don't be cross, it's sober truth. Whatever old people may tell you, nature stings and drives all young and beautiful and vigorous things to live. It's not our invention; it's her method. If you like it better, it's God's method. What do you say to that?"

They had come back to the cliff, facing towards the sun, and she was walking on the sea side of the path. She looked away to the spread calm of the great ocean, which was twinkling with light and whose surface appeared to be multitudinously and infinitesimally dented, like hammered silver. The little waves on the sands only disclosed themselves in a running ridge of deep blue close to the shore, which ended almost immediately in a curling ripple of whispering white foam. The wind was with the tide and was tired, languorous, and caressing. There was a wonderful absence of noise in the air. The sounds were all gentle and kind — a distant cawing of rooks, a church bell far away, a lulling rustle from the sea, and a crooning murmur in the wind. The sun, descending in a glory of piled and steadfast clouds, shone in their faces with a scarlet radiance which filled the whole horizon, and dazzled and warmed and paradised the green edges of the cliff and the curving path in front of them. To Laura at least it was as if they walked on a road of glory towards the gateways of heaven.

She brought her eyes back from the cool silver of the calm sea and let the red light dazzle them. "Why do you talk as if goodness didn't count?" she asked quietly.

"Do I?"

"As if it didn't exist at all!"

"Well, I didn't mean to do that."

"I don't think a girl would be nice who behaved as you suggest."

"Oh, come; you don't regard flirtation as a sin!"

"Yes, I think I do. I'm not sure that I understand what it means. But — well, you spoke about kissing. Surely a nice girl wouldn't let a man kiss her unless she loved him?"

"I hope not! But there are things temporal and things eternal. A little temporal love helps to brighten the dusty road of life. Eternal love is the more serious business of quarter-day, tradesmen's bills, and measles in the nursery."

She laughed, but she felt suddenly cold and unhappy.

"I think," he continued gaily, "that a girl can love a man for a day or two, amuse herself with him, have her romantic hour as Juliet, without wanting to marry him, and without doing herself any immortal harm. It's the serious, dead-in-earnest love that plays monkey-tricks with happiness and the decalogue. A little transitory flirtation is a mere friskiness, it blesses her who gives and him who takes, and they both part with a kiss and a laugh — no harm done to either!"

"I should like you to tell me one thing seriously."

"Which is?"

"Are there no marriages that are beautiful and happy? — none that isn't sordid, and careworn, and full of struggle?"

"Not one! Not one! Not a single blooming one!" He burst out laughing. "So you've discovered that, have you? Isn't it frightful? Dear lady, isn't it the very mischief? Whooping cough; what? The butcher's bill, the tailor's bill, the bootmaker's bill — all overdue; what? The doctor never out of the house. Cook giving notice to leave. Can't afford this; can't afford that! Arguments at breakfast, disputes at luncheon, a row at dinner; what? Oh, it's sad, but it's true. Too true, my child, too true!"

"No! It's not true. I'm sure it's not true."

"Here and there a brilliant and illustrious exception —so remarkable, so astonishing, nay, by George, so *miraculous* that people talk about it. A happy marriage! Think of that, now! Did you ever? Well I never? Wonders will never cease!" He laughed from his heart, pleased with the vigour of his irony. This girl, with her pretty soft face and her "fetching" little eyes, brought him out.

"Perhaps," she said suddenly, "there'd be more happy marriages if people were serious before they began. How can you expect people who flirt with anybody and everybody to settle down and make good husbands and wives?"

"I'm perfectly certain," he said, with a slow and funereal gravity, "that my own dear and revered parents began as solemnly and decorously as a couple of Presbyterians or a brace of long-faced Quakers; but no one could say that their married life has been a long dream of romantic bliss. It wouldn't be true. Extremely virtuous, extremely dull; but extremely troublesome and vexatious. If it wasn't for me they'd both yawn themselves into divorced graves."

Laura reflected that her own father and mother had probably begun their married life with portentous solemnity.

"I don't care!" she exclaimed aloud.

"What don't you care?"

"I still say a girl would be horrid who flirted with a man just for amusement."

"Then there are millions of horrid girls in the world. What a dismal thought!"

"Well, you wouldn't like your wife to tell you that—"

"*I shouldn't* mind in the least."

"What!" She stopped, and looked at him.

"Not in the very least."

"Oh, I don't believe that!" She hurried on again. She was really shocked. She felt that she disliked him. She felt that he was inferior. In that swift glance of hers his face had appeared cunning and common.

"Why in the world shouldn't a girl amuse herself?" he demanded. "Men do."

"I'm sorry for them."

"You're angry?"

"I don't like you for saying what you just said."

"Then I withdraw it."

"But you mean it."

"Not now."

"You're insincere!"

"If it does away with your anger, I don't care if I'm Ananias and Tartuffe rolled into one lost soul."

"No; I don't like that."

"But let me explain. I don't mean, for a moment, serious love. I don't mean passion. Good heavens, no! I mean just fun, boy and girl fun."

She tried to think what he meant by this distinction.

"If I got engaged to a girl and found that she had ever had a serious passion for another man, I should make my excuses, and retire hurt. But if she had merely amused herself —"

"Oh, it would be a thousand times worse!"

"But, why?"

"She wouldn't be worth loving at all."

"Why not?"

"She'd be a frivolous, vulgar — I'm sure you could never *love* such a person."

"Well, perhaps not."

"And the other woman might be good and splendid."

"She might, but a very decided 'No, thank you' for such a party, so far as *I* am concerned."

"Then," she cried triumphantly, "you would like a perfectly good and nice girl, one who had never flirted, and never loved anybody before?"

"Yes, I should."

"There! That's what I have been saying all the time."

"Hooray, then, we're agreed!"

She laughed.

"All the same," he said, "I feel that you and I have not enjoyed ourselves as much as we might have done if we had been less Calvinistic in our views."

She was within sight of home. She felt safe. "I'm quite sure about myself," she said.

"How do you mean?"

"As to flirting and all that."

"Tell me?"

"Well, if I kissed a man"— she turned her face and looked at him —"it would be with what you call passion, and only with passion!" She spoke proudly.

In a moment their positions were changed. She it was who knew everything. He who knew nothing. By the instincts and the intuitions of her sex, by the force of the purity of her nature, she had lifted herself high above his little ant-heap of experience, and could look down and smile at him with pity.

"I shall lose my head!" he exclaimed huskily. "Do you know — Look here, we must talk again. You're splendid. You're superb. Forget everything else I have said, and remember only my worship, my adoration. Do you know what you've done? You have set me on fire. I've never been on fire before, and I'm not insured. This is going to be disastrous. I'm afraid! Miss Thornton, you're a very lovely and a most dangerous

perplexity. If I don't pass my examination it will be your fault. I've half a mind to let the whole thing slide, go into the City, and tell you that —"

He paused.

In that pause her laughter came to him soft and provoking.

"One might almost think," he said, "that you are amusing yourself, that you know the book of life from cover to cover. But it's your innocence, your inexperience, that makes you so bewilderingly dangerous. If you really did know, you'd be only exciting."

"I've been thinking aloud all the day," she answered, "and I've learnt a lot, and I've enjoyed myself tremendously."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "And to-morrow, if you please, we'll carry proceedings a step further. Neither has quite exhausted the other, I think."

"And to-morrow we shall both be wiser."

"At any rate," he said, "you've given me something to think about."

CHAPTER IV

On the following day Mrs. Thornton's cold was better. She had left herself in the landlady's hands. Scalding mustard water for the feet, a bowl of boiling onion broth for internal application, and a smother of thick blankets on a bed blazing with hot-water bottles, had done their work. She woke weak but healed, took her breakfast in bed, and rose at eleven.

Laura, who had hitherto shared her mother's bedroom, was provided by the kindly Mrs. Flynn with a little apartment of her own. In paying her a final visit at night, the landlady had said with a knowing smile, "I shall have Master Philly on my hands next; and he won't recover so quick as your ma neither, I'll lay a pound!" Laura, who was loosening her beautiful hair before the glass, had flushed, and inquired, "Is he ill?" "Yes, miss; *very* ill; it's a case of heart disease." To this Laura made no answer, but began rather vigorously to brush out her hair. "What lovely white arms you've got, to be sure," exclaimed Mrs. Flynn, genuinely admiring; "I don't wonder Master Philly's struck by such lightning; but, mind! you mustn't encourage him if you aren't serious; he's got a very feeling nature, Master Philly has; it would be cruel to deceive him!" Laura wanted to order the woman out of the room, but not a scrap of courage could she summon for this dignified purpose. Therefore she laughed and said, "I've got other things to think of!"

When Mrs. Flynn came with tea and hot water in the morning, Laura inquired after her mother's cold, and was told the good news of a complete exorcism. "But you

haven't asked after my other invalid!" added Mrs. Flynn, shaking a reproachful head. Laura, who had dropped a piece of sugar into her tea-cup and was now adding the milk, smiled quietly, and said, "He causes me no anxiety, I assure you." She looked very pretty, sitting up in bed, with the tray across her knees, her face warm from sleep, her hair in a charming disorder. "Oh, you young ladies!" exclaimed Mrs. Flynn, watching this particular young lady pouring amber-coloured tea into a white cup with pink roses and a pale-blue ribbon; "nothing to do but go about the world driving men mad with love — what a lot you'll have to answer for! — heartaches and suicides, and I don't know what else — just because you're so soft, and pretty, and unoccupied. Well, it's safer to be like me — plain, downright, and with my living to get; no sentiment, not a scrap." Laura helped herself to a finger of toast, and glanced up at the lingering landlady with a smile that was half disdainful and half amused. "I should have thought you were the most sentimental person in the world!" she said, with something of the superior sting in her tone which characterised the ironies of her father. "What, me!" cried Mrs. Flynn, "me! Why, my dear, I married a man for his pension, and as soon as I'd buried him I went straight back to service, glad of it, and never looked back once. Oh, you make a great mistake if you think there's anything like that about me!" "But you *talk* as if you thought of nothing else," laughed Laura. "Oh, it's different with young ladies," said Mrs. Flynn; "quite a different thing; why, they've nothing else to do. Look at all the dances and parties, and picnics! What are they for except billing and cooing? I know how young ladies live, and what they think about, and what they talk about. It's nature to them. I don't blame them either. But, for myself, I'd rather work for my living."

As for Mr. Philly Syston, that selfish and prudent young gentleman was really definitely hit. He had been restless in his room, sleepless in his bed, and miserable in his bath — a frightful calamity. He had been many times haunted in his extreme youth by the scent of a woman's garments or the beautiful intonations of a seductive voice. But those effects had worn off. He could look back on many an agreeable convalescence. In the present case, however, a new element had disturbed his philosophy. It was not perfume, not prettiness, not raiment, that hung upon the beatings of his heart. He was obsessed by a few words. Those words had rung with truth. They had been uttered by lips of innocence. To construe them as coquetry would have been a crime, a blasphemy. It was their truth, their innocence, that gave them force. Magic words! Beautiful magic words, creating a new world in his heart and a new heaven in his soul.

She had said to him, meeting his eyes, that she could not kiss a man without passion, that only as passion was a kiss thinkable to her.

Did she know what passion meant? Of course. Every girl knew that. At least every girl with a warm skin and slumbrous eyes. He had no doubt on that subject.

To love her would be delicious. To win her, what a heaven! He could imagine nothing sweeter just then than the full possession of this glorious young creature in the first bloom of her rich beauty, in the first purity of her wondering innocence. In a few months she would be one of thousands, a merely pretty girl of the ballroom and the restaurant, looking about her, knowing everything, blasé, tarnished, dead to passion. But now, what a prize!

And yet, a subaltern, with a wife and a nursery! A

divided income. Precious little polo, precious little shooting, and certainly no career in the service. That way lay madness, certainly disillusion. Was it worth it? After all, was any girl worth it? Six months hence, would it not be to him as if he had never seen her? For pity's sake don't let him play the fool with his career. Twenty years on would be time enough for him to think of marriage. Marriage was the end of a man's life, the beginning of a woman's. Certainly he must not play the woman.

But when he came upstairs after his breakfast to inquire after Mrs. Thornton, and found Laura alone in the room, quieter, more self-possessed, and somehow more slumbrous-looking than yesterday, he felt himself to be mortally wounded.

He begged her to go on the sands with him, and she went to ask her mother's permission. Mrs. Thornton gave her consent. She had a perfect confidence in men who had the outward marks of good-breeding. A villain, in her philosophy, was never a gentleman. It seemed to her to be, whether it came to anything or not, a providential thing that Laura should have this opportunity for a full experience of a young man's society. Had she not suggested that Laura should *give* herself a little more?

So they went down the empty street with the dogs, and descended Newgate Gap to the shore. On the sands they faced eastwards, stumbling through the white and powdered dust to the firmer redder sand near the sea. A watery sun threw their shadows obscurely on this damp, shiny, and corrugated floor. The pools of sea-water were wrinkled by puffs and gusts of wind. The dogs, racing on before them, kicked up a dust of moisture and left paw-prints that disappeared almost as soon as they were made. There was an iron-greyness in the heaped

waves of the sea, a leaden tone in the scarred and crumbling chalk of the cliff, the sense of tears in the sky.

They could not talk with ease on account of the wind. Laura was glad. She liked the muffled roar and jangling clamour of the waves, the flog of the breeze at her ears and against her face and bosom, the sense of healthy elation in the cold air, the pale dazzle of the watery sun in her eyes. These things sufficed. She responded to them.

When they had passed the butts and rounded the corner of the cliff, they faced to the sea and picked a difficult and slippery way on the drenched rocks, from which the waves were withdrawing wrathfully and with sullen threats of return. She took off her gloves and stuffed them in the pocket of her jacket. She used her fingers to prevent her from slipping. The thick and soaking seaweed was pleasant to her touch. Deep-coloured anemones looming from the silver sand and the pale mosses of rock pools pleased her eyes. She walked slowly, looking about her, stooping down, peering, fingering. Every now and then she would stand still, facing the sea, one hand resting on a dripping limpet-covered rock, her eyes wrinkled to keep out the wind, her lips parted with the joy of the sea and the air. It was not an excitement, it was not a diversion, when Philly, who had watched strands of hair fluttering at her white ears, drew alongside of her; it was a disappointment.

These salt-smelling rocks, with their bunches of bladdered weed, their hidden pools, their unexpected spaces of dry sand, over which one walked suddenly with astonished ease, with their scrambling olive-green crabs flashing a rim of red at her from underneath, with their beautiful purple flowers, and crystal jelly-fish at the bottom of still pools, with the gnashing and champing

of foam-scattered waves in their distance, with the wild and wind-blown cries of sea-birds over her head — these delightful rocks evoked in her consciousness all the instincts of a childhood bounded by nursery walls and given to others. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to spend the whole day there. She wanted to sit on one of the tallest of those rocks, and, blown by the bright wind and sprinkled by the sparkling spindrift, to watch for the return of the sea, the great flooding sea, covered with the glory of the setting sun.

But he asked her to return to the sands and she obeyed him, reluctantly. He guided their way to a part of the cliff which acted as a buttress to the wind. They sat down in the fine sand, which was scattered with fragments of parched seaweed and chalk-smelling crumblings from the cliff.

"I want to tell you something," he said.

"Well?"

"If you will let me I should like to be perfectly frank with you."

"And serious?"

"Yes, and serious, too."

She picked up a handful of sand and let it run between fingers and palm on to her lap, watching it. She threw the last grains away, raised her head, and looked towards the sea.

"I want to tell you my position," he said earnestly, "and ask your advice. May I do that?"

She smiled. "I don't think you can be serious," she said. "How can I give you advice? I'm only a girl. I know nothing of the world. You discovered that yesterday: and I told you so, too."

"Well, you won't be cross, will you? That's all I want to know."

"No, I shan't be cross. Why should I?"

He lowered his gaze and regarded the dust under his eyes, leaning on an elbow, with the other hand shoving the sand here and there, quickly, nervously. "My position is this," he said. "I want to go into the Army, and I want to succeed in the Army. I want to be a good soldier. If there's fighting I want to have a hand in it. If there's reform I want to have a hand in that, too. I want always to be at work, always doing something; always succeeding, as a soldier. Can you sympathise?"

"Yes, as far as I can understand soldiering."

"Don't you like soldiers?"

"You are the first I have ever met!"

"Well, soldiering? — the Army as a profession?"

"I have not thought about it. I don't think it's the most interesting profession; do you? I mean — But of course, a woman doesn't look at life as a man does."

"What do you think," he asked, a little crestfallen, "is the best life for a man to lead?"

"Let me think!"

He watched her.

"Well?" he asked.

She laughed.

"Tell me."

She looked at him. "A gypsy's," she answered.

He smiled. "You're wrong. Horribly wrong! It's the worst life of all."

She shook her head, and raised her eyes to look at the falling sea.

"I tell you why," he said; "there's no discipline in it."

"Do you like discipline?"

"It's my religion."

"If I've got a religion," she said, "mine's Freedom."

"You must have discipline in life. Everything demands it. Health, strength, order, progress, virtue! Think it out." He sat up, and she watched his flexible

and refined lips, as he proceeded with enthusiasm —"If I had my will I'd tighten up the nuts and bolts of discipline in our national life a jolly sight more; and for all classes — the gypsy and the popinjay, the tramp and the lordling. I'd make 'em sing Nelson's motto at Trafalgar till they jolly well knew what it meant. I'd make 'em work, or I'd break 'em. I'd make 'em *smell* Duty. By George, I would! I'm a Radical and an Aristocrat rolled into one. I'd make a landowner give an account of his land — what men he is breeding for the country, as well as how many head of pheasants he is rearing for the hospitals and the poulterer. I'd stop every idle vagabond on the road, and turn him into the fields to work or starve. I'd sweep all the wreckage off the Thames Embankment and in the London parks and pubs, into barracks — never mind how old and how broken: I'd have battalions of the inefficient and unfit, an army of the worthless, and I'd drill 'em back to manhood. You don't realise how enormously important discipline is in a nation's life. All the mischief with us now is due to slackness, to the gypsy in us; we want to loaf through life, we want to slouch. Nature is rats on the loafer and the sloucher. She doesn't like the breed, and she won't have it. I assure you — do believe me — if you knew what the great cities of England are like, and how the villages are tumbling all to pieces, you'd see the value of discipline, and you'd think better of the Army. The Services are the two great reproaches to national slackness. They are the only tools we possess for keeping up the national organism. I want to be a soldier, not for the swagger of it and not for the glory of it, but for the use of it. Do you know what I should like to be?"

"Another Napoleon?"

"No, another von Roon."

He began to tell her how Bismarck and Moltke both

owed their success to the organising genius of von Roon, but stopped himself in the midst of his panegyric. He looked at her, and she met his eyes. Something of his manfulness, something of his enthusiasm, had touched her. She looked at him as if she wanted him to go on.

"Well?" she inquired, in her low voice.

"My ambition," he answered her, seriously and in a tone of trouble, "is in one scale of fate, and my human nature in the other. I want to be a soldier, a great soldier. To be a great soldier I must live a hard and resolute life. There must be no domesticity for twelve or fifteen years, if at all. Everything must be for the Army. But, I've got something in my nature which is telling me now — no, not telling me, *driving* me — to throw all that up, to let things slide, to be like the rest of the world. And I don't know which to do — to suffer and go on, or to surrender, to be happy — to be madly happy but ambitionless."

Her eyebrows lifted for a moment, and then settled down again over the dark lids. "Don't you know which happiness would last the longer?" she asked. "That's what you have got to decide."

"Yes; but don't you see, I'm not in a state to judge rationally. That's just it. I can't decide."

"Is it —?"

She stopped, shook her head as though to herself, and looked down at him, helpless and a little amused.

"What do you want to ask?" he said.

"Well, you've told me about one of the things, but not about the other. I don't really know what you are hesitating between. Between the Army and — Well, is it a girl?"

He nodded his head.

She smiled. "Only yesterday," she said, "you told me heroically that no Cleopatra should ever —"

"But it isn't Cleopatra."

"She stood for the whole sex of women!"

"I was a fool."

"Then you know what to decide."

"No."

"How can I help you? Only you can possibly say whether you will be happier with ambition, or with a wife. Nobody else in the world can say."

"Which do you think?"

"Oh, I think you would never be happy without ambition."

"But if I should fail! Suppose one looked back from a dead blank, and saw happiness thrown away at the start?"

"And suppose happiness came to an end, and from unhappiness you looked forward and saw others mounting up with wings like eagles?"

"I know."

"You had better choose the bigger thing of the two. A big fall is better than a little one."

"Which is the bigger?"

"To you?"

"Well, to me?"

"Glory."

He looked down. "I think I'll take a tremendous risk," he said. "Yes, I think I will." He raised his head. "Look here, Miss Thornton, I'm going to tell you the truth. Don't be unkind and cut me short at the very beginning. Be an angel and hear a poor beggar out. I love you, and I don't know what to make of it."

She said the stupid and obvious thing which rushes like a defence to the lips of a girl instantly overwhelmed by her first experience in sudden love. She said, "How can you love me? You've only just begun to know me."

Many a woman of thirty has used those words—

Heaven help them! Words which lose all bewitchment, which become banal and pathetic, as a coquetry! What a mistake! What a degradation! Words like these, like all simple things, can only be sweet on innocent lips. They must be really and profoundly true, the first defence of a startled, frightened and delighted soul, to charm and captivate. Hack them about, and they move either pity or disgust. One thing at least, nature has guarded from hypocrisy and masquerade; it is simplicity, the simplicity of innocence. That can never be *put on.*

The man stretched out his hand as though to touch her. She drew away from him, and regarded him with distrust. Her face was pale. He could hear her breathing.

"Whether you can understand it or not," he said, slowly and with decision, "I do love you. I love you very seriously. You've overturned half my philosophy, and given me a new gospel of life. I don't myself know how you've done it. But you have. The fact is accomplished. I know it, and you must believe it."

She was bewildered, but half pleased. It was wonderful to be alone with a man and to hear him declare his love for her — a strange love of which she had read in books, of which she had felt blind motions in her blood, a love which she had never experienced before. It threw her into confusion. She felt herself foolish and childlike. She did not in the least know what to say or what to do. All she could do was to look down, to smile, to fidget with her fingers, and to be angry with her troubled breathing.

"Believe me," he said quietly, "we never know how these things come to us. We can't calculate the effects of personality. There's no arithmetic of affection. Love is one of the mysteries."

A thought struck her. "But —"

"Don't be afraid to tell me everything you think. I've emptied my heart out to you."

If only she could breathe freely. "I don't understand," she said. "I really can't. But I was thinking —"

"Tell me."

"Well," she managed to burst out, "if you had met me in a crowd in London, you probably wouldn't be thinking what you think now. It's only because we're alone. It's not only I, it's I alone! I mean," she laughed, "you had better not give up glory for a caprice! Don't let us talk about it any more. Let us go back now. I want to."

"Not yet," he cried, and seized her hand. She drew it quickly away. "You must wait one minute. You must tell me two things. I want to know. Do you believe that I love you, seriously love you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't understand love. I should think people had to know each other and themselves, too, a long time before they could be sure they loved one another."

"Well, I do love you. With all my heart. If you wish, I'll test it. I'll wait and wait and wait. I'll make sure of myself. I won't say another word to you till I'm certain. But you must give me some hope by answering the other question. Do you care for me? — do you think you could love me?"

"Oh, I should have to think, too."

"But you like me?"

"Yes, I like you."

"Do you like me well enough to let me kiss your hand?"

"No, no!"

"Why not? Why do you seem so afraid of me?"

"I can't tell."

"Do you know how I'm hungering to hold you in my arms and kiss you on your lips and eyes?"

She laughed, fascinated and afraid.

"I'm mad with love for you," he said, with energy, with passion, with conviction.

She was conscious of his power. She looked at him. There was wonder in her eyes, and admiration, and willingness to be persuaded.

He said to her, "You make me suffer. You torture me."

She smiled, watching him.

He put out his hands and laid them on her arms. She quivered, shrinking from him, an appeal in her eyes as he brought his face close to hers. She felt his breath on her lips. "Dearest, sweetest!" he murmured, and their lips met as he whispered the words.

He felt her presently collapse in his arms, and drew back his face to look at her. She was white. Her lips were half open. Her eyes were closed.

While he regarded her she was shaken by a convulsion; the eyelids fluttered; she drew a long and shuddering breath; in a moment she opened her eyes and looked at him with fear. He spoke to her consolingly. She looked away from him, the same strange wonder in her eyes. He spoke to her again. Suddenly she slid away from him, let herself sink back, and, falling, turned on her side, covered her face with her hands, and lay crying in the dust.

He knelt at her side. "You aren't angry with me?" he asked.

CHAPTER V

THREE weeks later Philly Syston posted a letter in the smoking-room of his London club. It had taken him a long time to write. He had really bestowed pains on its composition. From a man used to swift thinking and perfectly satisfied with his ordinary expression, it was a tribute to Laura that he had given so much time and so much delicacy of feeling to this essay in single elopement.

As he came back from the letter-box he was hailed by a friend sitting with two other men in an atmosphere of tobacco at a little table occupied by tumblers and newspapers. He joined them.

"Dixon of the — th," quoth one of them, fresh from India, "always says that if he sees a youngster falling in love with a wandering maid out there, he gives him six months' leave and sends him home to England, *to get his eye in!*"

"That's a good phrase!" said Philly, and laughed. "It's wonderful," he added, striking a match for his cigarette, "how easily a fellow can get his eye out."

The man who had first spoken, putting down a tumbler of barley-water, and sucking his moustache, said with solemnity, "Quite a nice boy can believe himself head over heels in love with an old thing only fit to stick in a bun-shop. And if he marries her, like a young fool, he's done for; absolutely done for."

"Exactly," said another, getting up; "and he brings her home, sees her among the women of his own set, and realises what he has done. It's bad for him

and bad for the girl, too. One must keep his eye in!" He pulled down his waistcoat and went off to the tape-machine, to see the starters in the first race of the day.

There is a man in French history of whom it is written that he became "an oratorical machine and a stroke of tactics." The young gentleman of this narrative, on a smaller stage and in a minor degree, was moving in a similar direction. He was by no means a villain. In waking the soul of an innocent girl from ignorance to knowledge, he had merely allowed himself to be carried by a perfectly natural passion, out of genuine admiration into irresistible desire. He had not played with her feelings. He had not gone away to chuckle in secret over his triumph. It was a case of a temptation and a mood.

Indeed, if religion be excluded from modern life as an anachronism, one thinks it might go hard with a man to prove that our philanderer had done anything in the least dishonourable. The girl was admittedly beautiful and attractive; it was natural to wish to kiss her; in kissing her he did her no harm that the law recognises; and in professing that he loved her he told no lie. In that mood he did love her. Nay, he passionately worshipped and adored the desirable young creature. He was ready to sacrifice for her his career, his ambition, his zest for glory — in that particular mood.

The mood passed. He came out from it, and looked about him. He recognised the truth of the situation. He was practical — and to be practical is praiseworthy. It would never do. He had been carried away. She was probably feeling the same thing. He would write and ask her to compare notes, giving her the inclination of his own ideas, and professing a flattering respect for her wisdom and good sense. Better before marriage,

he reflected, than after. Who can say he was wrong? — who can blame him?

If he had been trained in the old-fashioned chivalrous principles created by the Christian religion, he might have had power to resist temptation. He might have felt — one never knows — that it was his duty (how odd the word sounds!) to protect Laura's innocence, to give her noble ideas of love, to regard her chastity as the sweetest flower of heaven struggling to live in human soil. It was not his fault that he lived in an age when the name Joseph has become a term of reproach, when the word Honour is restricted to debts and the rules of a game of cards, when Woman is the last adventure left to a protected and overfed civilisation yawning with ennui.

Moreover, the girl had been delivered into his hands. He could fairly accuse the mother. Once more the inevitable refrain of might-have-been brings us perilously near to the tabooed subject. If the father and mother had brought Laura up with religious ideas, if virtue to her had been an intelligent aspiration, one thinks she might have fought a stronger duel. Someone, a good and a strong man, has said, "No heart is pure that is not passionate, no virtue is safe that is not enthusiastic." We may at least be certain that for a generous and impulsive nature, for a temperament ardent, vivid, and imaginative, the discipline and the education of religious ideas are helpful in moments of temptation. That is a concession we can make without losing our caste as men of intellect.

Laura had lived through three weeks of fluttering excitement and secret anxiety. She was not conscious of pollution, but she charged herself with weakness and folly. Why had she let him kiss her? Worse, far worse, why had she abandoned herself to his kiss?

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She had not really loved him. It was only a mood. Something had swept away her will-power. She liked him. She might come to love him. But at that moment, there on the sands under the cliff, she had not loved him. It was this thought that reproached her, that stung her, that made her blood burn with shame.

When his letter came she neither broke down nor experienced relief. Her face flushed and she ground her little teeth — not hating him, but upbraiding herself bitterly.

And she must answer that letter. How?

To say she was not grieved and disappointed, would be to accuse herself of that which she most despised in woman's nature. She would *not* label herself a coquette. And yet to pretend that she cared would not only be false, it would be an appeal to his compassion.

She wondered how it would be if she did not write at all. No; that would leave him free to interpret her silence as he pleased. She could not trust his character to do that.

There was another course — to tell her mother the story, to humiliate herself by showing the letter, and to let another write the answer. No; she could not satisfy her mind that such an answer would save her self-respect.

She was still tortured by perplexity when her second sister came into the room, Rose Thornton, who was reckoned the worldly-wisdom of the family. Rose flourished on an occasional cynicism and had been even known to boggle her father with an epigram. This great virtue in Rose was attributed to the fact that she had been to school and mixed with other girls. The rest of the family had been educated at home. Rose had always been the handful. To school she had been

sent as a discipline, and it was like her to turn a righteous chastisement to profit.

"What's up, Laura?" she asked. "You look as if you'd been stealing sugar."

Laura's manner during these past three weeks, preceded by hysterics, had roused the suspicions of Rose. She had been watching. She had noticed Laura's devotion to the letter-box.

"I'm in a difficulty," said Laura.

She did not know how to do it, but her heart was strongly inclined to consult this vigorous young sister who carried about with her, in an atmosphere of pigtails and pinafores, the sense of a bigger world. If she could only bring herself to confess her folly! If she could only be sure of Rose's confidence!

Rose sat down on the edge of the bed, and thrust out her feet. She was fond of Laura, as all the sisters were fond of this "little mother"; she remembered how Laura had helped her in her lessons, taught her to be tidy, and on many occasions had stood between her and the displeasure of their father. How many times, too, had Laura undertaken to make her bed for her, to do her share of the dusting in the drawing-room, and to look after her mending! Laura was certainly a little high and mighty, a little self-centred and isolated from the others, but she was a good sort; she had always been kind.

"Tell me about it," said Rose; "if I can help you, you know I will; and, of course, I'll be secret."

"I've done a frightfully stupid thing," Laura burst out, blushing and smiling with shame. She walked over to her dressing-table and began to move things about. "Look here, Rose, you won't tell anyone, will you?" she asked, and turned round, drawing Philly's letter from the pocket of her print apron. Her hand-

kerchief tumbled to the floor as she drew out the letter. "I let a man kiss me," she said, stooping to recover the handkerchief; "and we were half engaged, and now he has written to say he doesn't think it would be wise to marry."

Rose smiled with delight. "But, Laura, darling, how *tremendously* exciting!"

Laura laughed. "I feel awfully ashamed!" she said, beginning already to see the matter in a new light.

"Where did you meet him? Is he good-looking? Young?"

"He's in the militia, working for the Army; it was at Margate; I lost my head; I made a perfect fool of myself." She handed Rose the letter.

"Are you fond of him?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't know. I don't know what love is."

Rose opened the letter, and began to read. "I thought it would be somebody old," she said, without looking up. "You are just the girl to make an old man—" She laughed, and raised the letter to her eyes.

"He took me by surprise," said Laura; "it was my fault in a way, but I wasn't prepared; I've never done such a thing before."

"Just let me finish," said Rose, still reading.

"You won't think badly of me, will you?"

"My dear Laura! Wait till I tell you some of my experiences!"

"You!"

"Rather."

"But, Rose, when—"

"Wait till I've read the letter."

Laura went to the window. She looked over the muslin curtain that covered the lower sash into the

dull and dreary garden below. Her eyes were sparkling, her lips were curved into a smile, the plump cheeks were hot and red. It seemed to her the best part of this episode that she could talk it over with another.

"Well, if you don't care for him," said Rose, handing back the letter, "I should just write and say that of course you never took him seriously."

"But that makes me out to be a flirt! I let him kiss me. And I kissed him."

"That's nothing," said Rose calmly.

"Nothing!"

"Rather not."

"Oh, I think it's awful."

"Then, you're a silly. Why, fellows kiss girls at dances like anything. Don't you know that? A kiss is only a lark. It's just fun."

"But a girl can't kiss a man unless she likes him!"

"She can if she wants to. But, don't you see, they do like them as a rule. And if they don't, they like the kissing. It's a form of flattery. It's exciting. I've been kissed dozens of times."

"By different people?"

"Rather!"

"Oh, Rose!"

"You're a ninny, you really are!" exclaimed the younger sister. "It's because you haven't been to school, and because you've stayed at home so much to help mother. And, besides, I don't think you're like most girls. You're fond of reading. You like being alone. You're rather secretive. If you went to dances and picnics and garden-parties, and met a lot of people, you'd soon find out that everybody's playing the game of love. What do you think men and women talk about? John Stuart Mill? The Greek Anthology? Croquet? Not they! Rather not!"

Laura regarded her sister with conflicting feelings. She was horrified by her opinions, but she could not help admiring, even envying, her assurance, her manner of the woman of the world.

"I should have told you before," said Rose, "about my own experiences, only I thought they would shock you. I didn't know you had begun the same game yourself. You'll be as matter-of-fact as I am in another six months." She smiled, and sitting farther on the bed, let herself lean back till her shoulders rested against the blue and white wall.

"I began at school," she said, with a laugh. "The girls at our school, especially the day girls, had a regular intrigue with the boys of two other schools close by. The whole town consists of schools, and all the schools carry on an intrigue with each other. We used to exchange letters. Jolly rum letters, I can tell you. I've met several boys no end of times. After dark, too! It was a regular spree. One of our big girls had to be sent home once, and there was a bit of a scandal. For a couple of terms we were watched like cats; but that made us talk all the more, and plan all the more. Then things went on just as they had been before the row. I know a tremendous lot. I could tell you some adventures that would make your eyes jump out! What are you looking at me like that for?"

Laura regarded her sister with a fascinated horror.

"I wasn't the only one," laughed Rose. "Some of the girls were much worse than me."

"Oh, Rose! how could you?"

"Girls are all like that in towns where there are lots of schools."

"But it's so dreadful!"

"It's jolly exciting, I can tell you! And then the

rhymes and stories are very funny. Some of them are witty, too. One of our girls used to write down all she heard. She kept them in an exercise-book in her box."

In a few minutes Laura found herself listening to stories which first made her blood run cold, and then sent that same blood leaping, burning, and flaming all over her body. The hardened Rose, swinging her feet over the little bed, her hands clasped behind her head and pressed against the wall, watched Laura with a laughing and mischievous amusement as she emptied her mind of dormitory indecency.

"Oh, don't, don't!" cried Laura, all of a sudden. "I can't stand it, Rose. I think it's horrible. You make me feel ill. How can you tell such dreadful things?" She went to the window, looked out, returned into the middle of the room, and then crossed to the chest of drawers. "I never heard such things in my life; I never dreamed people could talk like this!" She began to look at the books on the shelf above the drawers. "Don't you feel how dreadful it is?" she demanded, without looking round.

"Grown-up people tell stories like these," said the imperturbable Rose. "There's a French author who has written books full of them. And there are pictures and photographs, too; I've seen them. Besides, look at the pictures and advertisements in the papers! Nearly all the comic operas in London are just the same kind of thing, only veiled a bit more. Men take their wives to those plays, and they laugh, and get the songs, and sing them in drawing-rooms. It's only in Cambridge and little potty country towns that women are stuffy and prim. Why, don't you know that all the fashionable women in London are like that? Surely you've heard about Lady — and Mrs.—?"

"But it's wicked all the same!" protested Laura. She was standing in the centre of the room, facing Rose, and looking down at her.

"Perhaps it is; but all the same, why should one want to be good? No one believes in heaven or hell. No one goes to church, except as a form. The thing is to amuse oneself. If love amuses a person, there's no reason why —"

"But it's not nice — what you've been saying. Those stories. You know they aren't nice."

"What's *nice?* Nice is only a matter of taste."

"Don't you believe in goodness?"

"In a way. I wouldn't do anything to get myself into trouble."

"But don't you want to be your best?"

"I don't know that I've got a best."

"Oh, yes, you have."

"I should like to be prettier than I am; I should like to have a better figure; and I'd give ten years of my life to have feet like yours; but what else should I want to be? I can amuse people; I can attract men; I shall easily get a husband; and then — well, that's the end, unless one is very rich and can afford adventures."

Laura walked to the bed, sat down beside her sister, slipped an arm behind her waist, and bringing her hot and glowing face close to Rose's, said very gently but imploringly: "I don't want you to talk like this; I want you to be your sweetest and your best; you're such a dear, it's dreadful that you should spoil it all. Never mind what some people may be doing; the nicest people are different. It's far better to be good than bad. You know it's bad to like things that aren't nice. Those stories! They must injure your mind. There are other things to think about — better things. You wouldn't

like to marry a bad man, would you? Besides, whatever we may think, there is a difference between goodness and badness. I know it's difficult. I know that we have strange feelings, and get dreadfully tempted. But, don't you see, Rose, it is just because a girl can be so easily carried away that she ought to stick to goodness as hard as she can? Don't you see that?"

"I bet you were more carried away by that soldier-man than ever I have been! It's a jolly dangerous thing for a girl to be pure and innocent. Besides, I'm not really bad. I only like amusing stories, and I'm interested in men. A girl who doesn't feel attracted by men isn't natural. But, all the same, you're a real dear." Rose kissed her sister, by just turning her lips, not moving her hands from behind her head. "And it does me good to be with you and to hear what you say. You've always been more of a mother to the family than mother has. As for father—"

"Mother has got all the worries of housekeeping," said Laura, "and father has to deny himself to find the money for our expenses. I feel sorry for him."

"Then he shouldn't have brought us into the world. What chance shall we have to find rich husbands? We shall always look like country cousins. We shall always be dowdy and provincial. It's no use being young and pretty unless one has got heaps of clothes. I wish I could go to London. Cambridge bores me to death. Just listen to those beastly bells!" She got up. "It's a perpetual Sunday and an eternal funeral. If a few of the undergraduates weren't jovial I should die of melancholy. There are two awful nice fellows at Trinity. There'll be a merry time in May Week! Olive and I had a regular lark with them the other day. But I should shock you if I told you!"

Laura stood up too, and watched her sister.

"You won't ever do anything to disgrace our name, will you?" she asked.

"Our name!" laughed Rose. "My only feeling in that quarter is a burning desire for a change. But, what about that letter of yours? Shall I help you to answer it?"

CHAPTER VI

"JUST hold it so," mumbled Mrs. Thornton, whose lips were turned inwards to grip a couple of pins.

Laura, whose elbows up to this point had been raised, lowered her arms, held the swathe band as her mother had told her, and glanced in the mirror.

She was dressed in white muslin and pale blue silk, one of the dresses sent from Bath. The sun streamed upon her from between the laths of the blind. Her mother, kneeling at her side, was pinning a tuck in place, afterwards patting and smoothing the material down with both hands. "There!" she said, "it does beautifully. I declare I am getting quite a genius for dressmaking." She went to the double-bed and returned with a large muslin hat surrounded by blue ribbon. "Put it on," she said, "and let us see how you look." Laura placed the hat on her head.

Under the mirror was a row of boots — her mother's and her father's. On the dressing-table, with the articles of her mother's toilet, were her father's razor-case, hair-brushes, and lather brush. The whole room declared a divided ownership, and a squeeze to contain it. There were things hanging on the door. The chairs were occupied by clothes. The doors of the wardrobe would not close. Laura remembered when it had been still more crowded by the presence of a cradle, and a baby's bath and toilet-basket. It was the largest of the bedrooms, but the shabbiest and the dullest. Nothing suggested happiness, affection, or beauty. The one beautiful thing in the room was the young girl standing self-consciously

before the cheval-glass in her summer finery, with the sun dazzling her raiment and her soft skin.

"And the beauty of it is," said Mrs. Thornton, surveying her from head to foot with her head on one side and her hands half lifted to set something right, "that it will come in quite well for Olive or Rose another year. It's a great mercy that you are the tallest and fullest. Don't stand quite so stiffly, dear. Hold yourself more loosely. Now, let me see you walk about. No; don't be awkward. Just let yourself feel free and natural, as if you were in your ordinary dress."

While Laura was being unpinned and unhooked, Mrs. Thornton said to her, "It would really be a splendid match for you. And you would be able to help the others. Think how useful it would be, if you could have Olive to stay with you for part of the year, and then Rose, and then the others. London is a place where nice girls can always find good husbands. There's no doubt in the world that he admires you."

The menaced and objective he of whom Mrs. Thornton spoke thus enthusiastically was one Laurence Payne — a young, brilliant, dictatorial, and pushful personage who had blazed into the gloomy sky of the Thornton family during May Week like a star of the first magnitude. The magnitude was purely intellectual, for regarded physically Laurence was unimpressive. He had a sunken chest, a rounded back, and forward crouching shoulders, which gave him the appearance of a threat. There was something minatory in the expression of his face which accentuated this threat of the stooping shoulders. The line of the young lips was grim with criticism; between the depressed eyebrows rose a sharp stroke of energetic disapproval; he wore spectacles behind which his eyes watched for error with a ceaseless scrutiny; the point of his chin was like a spear.

The eldest son of Sir Webster Payne, whose work at the Board of Trade had begun to attract attention, Laurence was himself a member of the Civil Service, and already stood high in the favour of a certain Cabinet Minister famous for his faith in young men, his devotion to work, and his genius for discovering genius. There was no question that Laurence had a future before him. And not only was he brilliantly clever, extraordinarily able, and amazingly in earnest; he was good.

Laura had discovered his particular form of goodness at their first encounter. "I love Cambridge," he had said to her in his rather loud and incisive voice, "although Oxford ought to be a thousand times more sacred to me. I suppose one never ceases to cherish any place or any thing associated with the dawn of one's life, however small its influence may be on the inner life. Oxford, from which everything has come, does not move me so much as Cambridge, which really gave me so little."

She said something girlishly loyal about Cambridge.

"I know, I know," he said indulgently; "but looking back now, isn't it clear that the most glorious achievement of modern times came from Oxford? St. Mary's ought to be the Mecca of all good Catholics. What can compare with that superb resurrection of the Church? — Pusey's work, Newman's work. Just think what they did."

When he discovered that she knew little of the Tractarian Movement, he begged to be allowed to send her some books from London. And when a little later he found that she had no real membership with the Church he there and then set about her conversion.

"That is the great condemnation of Cambridge," he said. "Men here are either evangelicals or agnostics.

They don't face the great general question. They are all the victims of detached ideas. None of them really understands religion."

Wherever Laura went during May Week, Laurence made his way to her side, and always, after a few initiatory remarks on the scene of their meeting, the weather, or the entertainment overnight, he brought the subject round about to religion. He spoke so earnestly and even so persuasively on some occasions, that Laura, casting about for something in which to believe, almost felt herself fond of him. It not only flattered her to think that this brilliant young personage singled her out for his attentions; it not only pleased her to feel that she was losing her nervousness and *gaucherie* in his society; she was genuinely interested in the subject of religion to which he had brought her as a new thing at an age when many of her contemporaries were persuaded that they had exhausted the subject.

She felt an instinctive need of a goal, a beaten track, and a guide. Life had begun to perplex her. She saw that the life of her father and mother became every year more marked by failure, more choked by sordid, unintelligible care. She saw that her sisters pressing up behind her were exposed to perilous temptations, lacking in their lives the sanctifying influence of a high purpose. And in her own heart she was conscious of an emptiness and a silence. If she could only believe in something that was beautiful and helpful and true!

She wore the white and blue frock to a garden-party. It was one of those University gatherings where reverend signors chat amiably together, matronly dames gossip together, and innumerable young ladies congregate together and ardently wish for the society of young men while they rather superciliously study each other's raiment. Laurence greeted Laura as she arrived, dis-

engaged her from her mother and sisters, and led her away to the most secluded corner of the garden.

Towards the end of their intercourse he said to her, "I go back to London to-morrow, Miss Thornton, and I want to take back with me the permission to write to you. Now, will you be very kind and let me ask your mother for that permission?"

She smiled and thanked him.

Before she left he came to her and said, "I have spoken to your mother. But now I want a promise from you. If my letters bore you, will you tell me so?"

Five months afterwards, so great progress had Laura made in this correspondence on the subject of religion, Laurence Payne came to Cambridge for a week, saw her every day, and proposed to her. He proposed so amiably and politely that even if Laura had not been mindful of the pigtails and pinafores pressing up behind her, and even if she had not felt a great respect and liking for him, it would have been difficult to deliver an absolute negative. For he only asked that a year of closer intimacy should characterise their relations, a year in which they should each study the other and see if marriage would truly be a happiness and joy to both of them. "Let us intensify our friendship," he had said. "We shall be guided and directed."

Never was a girl eager for a great love so chilled and paralysed. She wanted to throw herself into strong arms, to rest in the shadow of power, to lose herself utterly in the ocean of an immense adoration. Her dreams of love were warm and tender and embracing. This reality was like an iceberg edging and nudging at her soul. But she told herself that she was romantic and foolish; she recognised that it was her duty to get married; and she knew that the man who sought her, this energetic force in spectacles, was good.

Sometimes she smiled to herself, comparing her two experiences of this much talked-of, this most venerable and eternal question of love. The man who had kissed her with sudden passion, had calculated afterwards; this other, calculated beforehand. Both were prudent!

Her mother rejoiced over Laurence. Nobody could be better. He was a godsend, not only to Laura, but to the other girls. Think of the opportunities she would possess as his wife! Apparently he knew everybody in London. They would have an establishment. Laura would meet ministers and move in the most brilliant circles. She would live, in fact, at the centre of life, in the metropolis of the world. How splendid for Olive! How splendid for Rose! How splendid for the others!

Even Blake began to lose something of his melancholy. He despised Laurence very heartily as a "corner-creeping Jesuit," and sturdily regarded him as a prig consecrated by nature and his schoolmasters to nothing more illustrious than the office-stool of a national clerk; but he saw a ray of hope shining on his path from the bright spectacles of this forceful and aggressive Tom Noddy. With three or four of the girls married, and King kicked out into the world to shift for himself, he might get to the mountains again, might at any rate allow himself more than one day's golf in the week.

There was high excitement in the house when Laura departed for London to spend Christmas with the Paynes. To Laura herself the event was almost more than her nerves could support. She had the sense of going to that unknown house and into that unknown family as a hat from the milliner, for inspection and approval. She felt herself to be an applicant for a situation, almost a supplicant for charity. She dreaded Lady Payne, and she dreaded the three sisters. How

they would look her over! How they would question her! And how almost certainly they would discover that she did not really love Laurence.

The first hour after her arrival found her with all these fears dissipated. Lady Payne, who was a mountainous and billowy person extravagantly dressed in the pomp and magnificence of the period, was not merely gracious, not merely kind; she was sincerely affectionate. "I knew it would have to be a true daughter of Venus to create love in the heart of our saintly Laurence," she said, chuckling and bobbing her fine head; "but I did not expect," she added, pinching Laura's cheek, "so wonderful a likeness to the mother." The three Miss Paynes, rather thin, rather pinched, and rather long and narrow in the face, who all wore their hair in high fringes, and had high lace-collars to their black dresses, and looked extremely like a group of Royal Princesses, although undemonstrative in their manner were quite kind and gentle to Laura. There was a brother in the house who earned a comfortable income from the Government and wrote articles in the reviews, encyclopedias, and publications of the learned societies — an agreeable person, so satisfied with himself that he took pleasure in finding something satisfactory in other people. "Your main business in life," he half-whispered to Laura, "lies in preventing Laurence from becoming a Roman Catholic!"

Sir Webster, far from proving the ogre Laura had expected, turned out to be the dandy and man of pleasure of the family. He was tall, spare, and distinguished-looking. His white hair, which was like silver, heightened the fine effect of his red skin, his black eyebrows, and the deep rich brown of his gallant eyes.

Laura liked him more than any of them at first. He was always so cheerful and natural, always so eager

to make her happy and keep her amused. But later on she began to be a little afraid of him. He kissed her too often, and would fondle her arms, and tell her that she was charming. For this reason, Laura dreaded to be alone with him. But when they went to a theatre or a dance he always insisted that she should sit next to him, and she found that this was unpleasant.

There was scarcely a day of her visit without an event. They took her to dinner-parties, to concerts, to theatres of every kind, to restaurants, to dances, to fancy-dress balls, and to the sights of the town. It was a dream of delirious pleasure to Laura. Not once in all that long visit did she ever enter a ballroom without excitement or follow a play without a stretched interest. Everything was a spell and a magic to her senses — the dresses of women, the crowds of people, the brightness of the streets, the luxury of houses and restaurants, the splendour of everything that surrounded her, from the bedroom in which every night she fell asleep tingling with excitation to the motor-car that carried her to and fro all through the wonderful day.

It was her first experience of a great capital — a great centre of life as distinct from a centre of learning, a centre of commerce, or a centre of anything separate from the general. She was overwhelmed by the unceasing energy of this huge city, where wealth and poverty, business and idleness, grandeur and misery, seemed inextricably entangled in some furious intensity of purpose.

She was touched by the kindness of people. Great and famous men, whose photographs she had seen in illustrated papers and shop-windows, showed her a charming and a playful courtesy; women of quality, the very leaders of fashion, smiled upon her with an encouraging indulgence. She never went to a reception or a

ball without encountering kindness from the great and powerful.

Laurence was evidently proud of her, though he still maintained a rigid control of his feelings. He kissed her hand in bidding her good-night, and kissed her cheek when wishing her good-morning. He never embraced her, nor sought to be alone with her in his home.

She went with him and his sisters to church and made her first acquaintance with a sumptuous ritual. She was astonished by what she saw in church, just as she was astonished by what she saw in theatres. The vestments of the priests, the elaborate ceremonial of the altar, the swinging censer, the smoking incense, the tinkling bell, the kneelings and prostrations — fascinated her attention more than they appealed to her reason or moved her heart. Perhaps this was due to a feeling of nervousness which always accompanied her worship; for she did not know the rules of these rich services, and was uncertain as to when she should bow and when she should kneel. On her first visit to this church, for instance, she suddenly discovered during the Creed that everybody kneeled down and buried the face in the hands; she did not perceive this action until it was too late for her to imitate the others; and when they rose up again, and she consulted her book, and found that they had kneeled because of the words —"And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary," she blushed scarlet and felt herself guilty of indelicacy.

Laurence and his sisters always issued from these services with enthusiasm. "How beautiful it was!" they would exclaim, and praise was given now to Father Smith and now to Father Brown; nothing ever being said of the hurried sermon which they seemed to regard as a tiresome interruption of the gorgeous ceremony.

Very seldom did Laurence speak of religion to her during this visit, and then only in an indirect manner. He would put his handkerchief to his nose as they passed a Nonconformist chapel, and laugh when he explained the reason of his action. Once when a crowd of vulgar young men passed them in the street, bawling the chorus of a song from the latest comic opera, he said to her, "That is the future of the nation, without the authority of the Church."

At the end of her visit Laura was not more in love with Laurence, but she felt herself more acclimatised to the atmosphere of the idea that she should one day become his wife. She had seen men who quickened in her livelier feelings, she had danced with men who excited in her a spirit of daring, one man, indeed — a rather sentimental and precious young person — had almost stirred in her heart the perilous sentiments of romance; but, on the whole, she could say with perfect truth that she liked Laurence very well, and that she could anticipate a happy and pleasant existence as his wife.

It was not until she had returned to Cambridge, and had wholly exhausted the narration of her exciting adventures in London — not until she and Laurence had picked up again the broken threads of their ecclesiastical correspondence — that she began to experience a curious and haunting sensation of disappointment and disillusion. This feeling did not altogether concern Laurence. It had rather to do with her own soul and its struggle to establish some rational, satisfactory, and lasting relation with the unseen. London had shocked her, delighted her, and bewildered her; looking back on it all, it seemed to her that the religion she had experienced was but a hobby or a fad in a roaring circus of selfishness and luxury and the very frankest materialism.

Rose and Olive were behaving rather madly. They wore their hats and walked in a way that Laura, fresh from London, felt to be rather rakish and second-rate; they went about alone together and kept secret appointments with undergraduates; they were inclined to be impatient and censorious at home; Mrs. Thornton confessed to Laura that she was worried about them.

Laura tried to influence these younger sisters by talking to them in a very sweet and gentle way about religion; but she experienced in herself, even while she was proselytising, a sensation of unreality and uselessness — a sensation of which she had been aware when Laurence and his sisters had exclaimed of a service, "Wasn't it beautiful!" She began to feel more and more that her religious progress was a mere somnambulism. She did not believe in a great many important doctrines. In fact, her religious life, which she had cultivated so assiduously, was nothing more than an affectation, a mere pose of the mind which had exercised no influence whatever on her heart. But if religion had no foundation in reality, what was the main business of life? She thought of certain dinners, dances, and plays in London.

She began to be visited by that anarchical feeling of revolt which she had experienced alone by herself on the Margate cliffs. She wanted to tear up a great many historical documents, to pull down a great many venerable landmarks, to disengage herself from a great many immemorial restraints, and to burst free and untrammelled into some wild freedom of the human soul.

She desired to escape from the affectation of a false spirituality and also from the grossness and sensuality of a materialism which she felt to be wrong and depraving.

Her mood was the poet's when he exclaimed:

"Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits — and then
Remould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!"

She was saved from the wear and ravage of this mood by a wise tactic on the part of her mother. Mrs. Thornton considered it would be an excellent preparation for the life confronting her if Laura now took upon her shoulders the whole responsibility of housekeeping. "You will not only be learning all the business of life," she said, agreeably; "you will be setting me free to give more time to the younger children."

So Laura visited the kitchen every morning, talked to the cook, inspected the larder, and walked abroad with a little list of orders for the tradesmen. On Mondays she picked up the washing; and on Saturdays she counted the clean linen. She paid the books and kept the family accounts.

Her chief diversion was music. She played very indifferently, for she had never been properly taught, and she sang entirely without method, for her voice had never been trained at all; but it gave her pleasure to go into the drawing-room when the house was quiet and the room was empty, and there on the feeble piano to play some of the music which had made most effect upon her in London, and very softly to herself to sing the words.

The music she liked most of all was Mendelssohn's, and she never tired of singing, *But the Lord is mindful of His own* and *O Rest in the Lord.*

CHAPTER VII

SHE was beginning to get her trousseau ready when news came from Laurence that he was ill and would have to winter abroad. Lady Payne wrote to Mrs. Thornton a long letter which was not shown to Laura. The danger was tubercular.

Laura wrote sympathetically to Laurence, put her trousseau by, and went on with her domesticities. Olive shortly afterwards departed to spend a few weeks with Aunt Isabella at Bath. King, who was cramming for the Army, made life brighter for Laura, and was on better terms with his father. The other girls were fast growing up, and fast pressing Laura into womanhood.

The letters which Laurence wrote from St. Moritz were brighter and more amusing than usual. He was reading French literature and recommended certain books which he sent her from time to time. She was astonished by the tone of these novels, which were sometimes flippant, prurient, and very often nakedly passionate. They had small effect upon her mind, but she was surprised that Laurence should commend them. On one occasion he wrote to her and said: "However one is amused by this cleverness of portraiture and this swiftness of literary effect, does one not feel that the psychology is imperfect because surface, and surface because it never penetrates to the soul? But how delightfully writers of this *genre* while away those hours of tedium which profounder men would only overcloud, stretch out, and exasperate."

She discovered that most of these books, in spite of a certain sad sweetness and in spite of an extreme cleverness, underlined the cynical philosophy of Rose, and revealed humanity only in the *milieu* of the farm-yard. It began to worry her that almost all the books she read dwelt upon and stressed those very feelings in human nature which conscience led her to feel were best avoided and ignored.

King was a joy to her, but something of an anxiety. He was for ever wheedling half-crowns out of her housekeeper's purse, and distressing her sympathy with complaints of his dull life and restricted freedom. "Other fellows get an allowance at my age," he would grumble; "I only get pocket-money, which barely keeps me in cigarettes. Look at my clothes! I haven't had a new tie for three months!" He used to boast of his acquaintance with wine-bars and his knowledge of horse-racing. Laura sought to restrain him; she felt that these things were inferior and perilous. "You're the only person I know," he once said to her, "who doesn't make goodness a sermon."

Laurence returned in the spring, and Laura went to London on a visit. She was shocked by the change in him. His sallow complexion had become almost transparent; he was very much thinner; and the loud and incisive voice had completely lost its ring. However, he protested that he was feeling a new man, and discussed the prospect of their marriage in the autumn with something like enthusiasm. This visit was not so gay as the other, and Laura spent much of her time alone with Laurence. If she was not conscious of love for him, at least she recognised in her feelings a new and warmer element — the kindness of a good and gentle woman's sympathy. She did not think of herself; she felt the profound pathos of Laurence's tragedy, stricken down

at the threshold of a promising career after a laborious youth of studious work and high purpose.

Autumn came, but the wedding was postponed. "My doctors think I should wait another year," he wrote to her, "and perhaps they are right. It would be a bad beginning of our married life if I came upon your hands as a tedious invalid. I have developed another cough, and apparently there is trouble in my throat."

He wintered abroad, but this time Lady Payne took Laura in the party. The time passed pleasantly for all of them. Laurence improved in health. His sisters and Laura greatly enjoyed the sports and made many interesting acquaintanceships. They returned to England in the best of spirits.

On the second day of their return Lady Payne sent for Laura, who was in the drawing-room listening to the singing of Laurence's sisters. She went to the dining-room, and found the family doctor and Lady Payne waiting for her. The doctor appeared to be grave and troubled. Lady Payne greeted Laura with a brightness which she felt was put on. and with a cheerfulness which she felt concealed some hidden tragedy.

"We want to talk to you, Laura darling," said this kind person, smiling and bobbing her head, as she took the girl's hand and held it between both of hers, smoothing it and caressing it. "Sit on the arm of my chair and hear what Dr. Campbell has to say about dear Laurence. We have been talking about his health. You know, there is need to be careful about these things. We musn't expose you to risk. It isn't only Laurence we have got to consider."

Laura looked at the doctor, who was standing on the hearth-rug, an elbow resting on the mantelpiece, the hand

raised to rest his head, the fingers of the other hand fumbling in his waistcoat pocket.

"I have got to tell you, Miss Thornton," said this physician, straightening himself up, "that an early marriage is out of the question. Mr. Laurence Payne is not fit to be married now, and may not be fit for another two years. It will, in fact, be necessary for him to leave London at once and go into a sanatorium for some considerable time. Whatever he may say to you, I want you to know that there can be no question at all of marriage for at least two years."

Lady Payne interrupted—"So you see, darling, we have got a great deal to consider; but that will come later on. What I want you to know is that Dr. Campbell's opinion is against marriage for at least two years."

"It is one of those sad cases, Miss Thornton," said the doctor, folding his arms, "where the disease is easily contracted. Mr. Laurence would be the last man in the world, I am sure, to wish to expose you to such a risk. Indeed I have discussed the matter with him, and, although very naturally disappointed, he cordially agrees that the marriage should be indefinitely postponed. He is not only a good man, he is a wise man. It would be something like a crime if he asked you to marry him."

"And, Dr. Campbell," said Lady Payne, "you were going to—"

He nodded his head. "Yes," he said, placing his fingers in the pockets of his waistcoat and looking down for a moment at the rug. "It is possible," he said, glancing at Laura out of the corners of his eyes, "that he may make light of his illness to you—not to deceive you, but because he really does take a thoroughly hopeful view of himself. Now, of course, we do not want

you to depress him by appearing to know the truth, but we want you to convince yourself, because of what may happen in the future, that the trouble is of a very dangerous, indeed I might say, almost hopeless character. You must convince yourself of that. I give it to you as my opinion that Mr. Laurence is very seriously threatened indeed. Lady Payne is writing to your mother on the subject, and if necessary I shall write to your father; but please convince yourself — your life is young, and before you take any definite decision you have a right to —"

The door opened suddenly. Laurence entered the room.

He was very pale; his eyes shone behind their spectacles, he was breathing noisily.

Laura rose from the arm of Lady Payne's chair and confronted him with tears in her eyes, her lips trembling.

"What have they been telling you? he asked huskily. "Don't believe them!" He took her hand and held it. "I'm going to get well. I *know* I shall get well."

"Of course you will, dear," said Lady Payne briskly.

He looked at the doctor. "In spite of all he says, all he's been telling you, I'm going to get well." He squeezed Laura's hand, and rested against the edge of the table, staring first at the doctor, then at his mother, and finally glancing with anxious eyes at Laura.

"And you are going to make a good beginning," said the doctor, "by doing exactly what we have ordered. Aren't you?"

"Even," said Laurence, breathing hard, "if I have to live in the South Sea Islands, I mean to get well. London may be impossible. My career may have to go. I'm ready to face that. But there's still life. One doesn't give that up in a hurry."

"The will to live is half the battle," said the doctor.

"I haven't got only myself to think about," said Laurence, squeezing Laura's hand. "I mean to get well for the sake of another. It's—" He breathed harder and put his hand vexatiously to his throat, encountering the doctor's gaze with something like hostility.

"You mustn't strain yourself by too much talking," said the doctor. "Come, it's time you began to obey my orders."

"It's—"

"No, dear, you mustn't distress yourself," said Lady Payne, rising and going to him.

"It's the will of God!" Laurence burst out. "I shall get well."

"Amen!" said Lady Payne. "Amen."

Laura turned her head away, clinging to Laurence's hand while the tears overflowed from her eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

A WEEK afterwards Laurence went into a sanatorium. His mother, one of his sisters, and Laura accompanied him, and stayed for a week in the neighbourhood, seeing him every day.

His manner was resolutely cheerful. "I've brought, in my luggage," he said, "all the classics of hilarity. It will be quite impossible for me to lend books to any of the feminine *inmates!* I intend to browse and grow fat. Aristophanes will be delightful in a Bath chair. *Gil Blas* and *Rabelais* and *Tartarin,* taken with a glass of sterilised milk at eleven, ought to be vivifying. And Butler — I mean to read *Hudibras* right through, if it doesn't bore me with the argument."

It was almost pitiful to observe how studiously he avoided any mention of religion. His library of mysticism and devotion remained undisturbed in his room at home. He never made any inquiry concerning religious arrangements at the sanatorium.

Laura had refused Lady Payne's offer to effect a release from her engagement. She was deeply moved by the condition of Laurence, and it would have seemed to her the act of an assassin to leave him. All her letters to him were now expressed in far warmer language, and she became aware of a fresh tenderness at her heart. At first she had sought to cheer him by speaking of her religious development, but finding that he ignored this subject in his answers and wrote only of the comedy of the sanatorium, she let the matter drop — and not only from her letters.

Every time she went to see him with Lady Payne or one of his sisters, she observed how the comic spirit developed in him, albeit with a certain strain of acerbity, while the religious life which had formerly been his chief occupation was entirely ignored.

She came to the conclusion that religion was a depressing subject, and one which apparently only served the soul while troubles and sorrows remained in the shadows of romance. It broke down, she felt, when the soul really wanted to lean on support. The crutches on which Laurence was hobbling about his narrow and shrunken world were optimism and humour.

During this time a terrible thing happened in the family. Blake Thornton missed a valuable book. His search for the missing volume discovered other losses from his shelves. Everybody denied all knowledge of the lost volumes, King emphatically. Three days later Blake came across one of the books on the shelves of a second-hand dealer. He made inquiries, and returned home in an uncontrollable fury. He seized a walking-stick from the hall as he entered, and called for King in a voice that made everyone turn pale. The sound of his blows came through the closed door. He broke the stick over his son's shoulders, and threw him out of the room. It was only Mrs. Thornton's courage which saved the boy from being turned out of the house.

Other events, and less serious, followed to vary the monotony of this trying period in Laura's life. Olive became engaged to a young don. King failed for the Army and passed into the Indian Police—"Set a thief to catch a thief," was his father's comment. Rose went as a governess to a family in Vienna.

The younger sisters were now putting up their hair and letting down their frocks. One of them spent the greater part of the year at Bath. The others were mak-

ing the most of their opportunities at Cambridge. As the funds of the family continued to worry Blake Thornton, who had lately contracted an unfortunate fondness for whisky, Laura seldom went to parties in the Botanical Gardens or appeared at any of the greater receptions and festivities demanding fine raiment. She dropped out of things, as the phrase has it; which means that her temperament and character had time to develop while other people ran about and made themselves hot. But there were times when she felt as one who from the darkness of mourning and the shadows of grief sees the pageant of youth and happiness go laughing by in summer sunshine.

Music and reading became more and more the consolation of her life. While she found an increasing curiosity in the novels of Tolstoy and Balzac and Flaubert, the plays of Ibsen, and presently in the novels of Meredith, Hardy, and Gorki; and while she grew more and more out of sympathy with the mystical religious atmosphere in literature into which Laurence had first led her — she found that no music had any power over her mind except the religious music of Mendelssohn and Handel. She was continually humming to herself the strain of:

"He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and shall carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young."

For the sentimental ballad she had no taste. Chopin's music she had scarcely heard. The great orchestral spirit of Beethoven was unknown to her. It was merely a sweet strain from what is called sacred music that had penetrated to the silence of her soul, and now haunted her lonely but fruitful life with an indefinable tenderness.

Reading taught her all that a girl need know about life; music accompanied this growth in knowledge with the whispering of another world.

Olive was married, and soon after the ceremony Mrs. Thornton said to Laura: "We shall have to think seriously about this engagement of yours. It is dragging on in a manner I don't like. We must face the truth — it may never come to anything. What then? You will have lost your chances."

There were moments when something that she had read, some picture she had seen, or some sudden stirring of nature in her blood, drove Laura into a blind and wanton longing after love. To go on living this shadow life, a phantasm among phantasms, an echo among echoes; never to know real love, never to be thoroughly and wildly happy — how terrible, how insupportable! Was it for this she had been born into the world? Her desires, her faculties, the machinery of her mind and body — were they without a place in the scheme of things, without any purpose except that of chastisement for her own soul?

In these moments she lost all sense of Laurence, and stretched out the arms of her spirit to the great Universe, craving for love.

Laurence grew steadily worse. For six months he had not uttered a word. When she went to visit him he wrote the replies to her questions on a slate. Every day for a fortnight she watched him writing these answers, read them, and wiped them out.

One of the doctors told her that there was no hope of a recovery. Laurence was losing weight. The throat was seriously attacked. "Miss Thornton," he said to her gravely, "you ought not to come here any more; and Mr. Payne ought to release you from your engagement."

But the chivalrous idea held her to the useless bond; indeed, the more she saw how hopeless and dangerous was her loyalty the more earnestly did she protest her desire to wait. It was impossible to love him. He was like a skeleton; his breathing was dreadful to hear; he constantly manifested a peevish and querulous disposition. All she could do was to sit at his side, to read aloud to him, to talk to him, to affect love for him, to express her sympathy by little acts of service, and to prevent herself from shuddering when he coughed and raised the stained handkerchief to his lips. There were times when she longed to feel for this dying man a great and overmastering love, so that she might cling to him and die with him and make a heavenly ending of her tiresome life.

When Olive's baby was born Laura experienced a fresh grief. For the first three or four weeks this baby was only an idea — the idea of maternity striking on her own deprivation; then it became something like a torture to her soul. The little new life, so fresh and fair and enchanting, gave itself to Laura — recognised her, smiled into her eyes, lifted its hands to her, snuggled into her bosom. She was the favourite. To no other did the child go with such a rapture. In no other arms did it fall so easily asleep.

"Do you know, Laura dear, I'm rather anxious about you and baby," Olive said to her one day. "I was talking to the doctor about it. You see, dear, you're so often with poor Laurence. There's the risk of infection. Consumption is so terribly contagious."

So Laura tore the love of this little child out of her heart, not without many nights of secret tears, and abandoned herself to the shadows of a life that had become absolutely unreal to her soul.

She was still feeling the agony of her loss in the

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child's love, when a letter from Laurence plunged her into despair. "Our engagement — ought one rather to call it an entanglement?"— he wrote, "puts me in mind of a tale by Mlle. de Meulan before she married and made Guizot. A couple present themselves at the municipality to be married, but the municipal officer has been called away and has left only his excuses and apologies. They retire, and call again the next day; but it is raining; they are behind the time; and the officer has departed. 'To-morrow, then,' they say. But on the morrow the lady's aunt is ill, and she is summoned to her bedside. And so on, and so on. Contretemps succeeds contretemps; the marriage is put off and put off — till the lovers are old and the interest is gone. Well, I am not sure whether it is worth your while to wait any longer. I don't get better. I doubt if I shall leave this place for another year or more. And in the meantime you are losing your youth. Write and tell me if you would not rather be free. Do not fear to hurt my feelings. I have unfortunately got to that stage of hypochondriasis where the mind only exists in an absolute egotism. I exist for myself. I cannot be interesting to other people. Nothing that the world can now do has any power to hurt me."

Laura wrote and told him that she was resolved to wait. But his letter had a most disastrous effect on her mind. She applied to her own longing for love that story of the marriage postponed and postponed *till the interest was gone.* If that great love of hers should never be satisfied! What a wretched prospect! — year after year of waiting, hoping, longing, and hungering, all in vain! The face losing its softness, the limbs their flexibility, the hair its lustre, the heart its hope! Old and alone. Wanted by no one. Never to nurse a child

at her breast. Fruitless. A life without significance. A heart without reason. A soul without gratitude.

She endured the burden of this despair for more than a month. Then very gently it came into her heart that thousands of women wait and watch every year for love that never comes, long for that love, and long for maternity, but remain always fruitless. How do they live? Surely, not as she was living then, in revolt and despair. No! These women forget their sorrow in service to others. They become the saints of civilisation. That was what she must become. In her own little place in the world she must give herself to others. If ever a home needed a saint it was this home strangled by the commonplace and smothered by profitless materialism.

She set herself to be more useful to her mother. She helped her younger sisters in their lessons. She made herself the companion of the sisters nearest to her in age. And she endeavoured to soften the asperities of her father's nature.

But while she became more and more like an angel in the house, while a new beauty shone in her face, and while a fresh tenderness came into her voice, often — Heaven knows how often — her soul was dragged into hell by frustrated longing and she had to lay strong hands upon her will to keep her self-respect.

At such hours in her tortured life the one kiss she had ever known returned to her lips with the fires of passion and all the furious clamour of rebelling nature. It was as though all the forces of the universe swept her inclinations towards obedience and fulfilment of natural law, while the poor soul dragged and swung behind like a dead body at nature's chariot wheels.

Her release came at the age of five-and-twenty. Laurence died in his sleep on the morning which brought

her a letter containing the sentence, "How meaningless life is without the interpretation of religion; and yet it requires perfect health and profound leisure to cultivate religion."

CHAPTER IX

"IF you promise to keep the secret," said Uncle David, walking briskly, "I will tell you something."

Laura, who had taken a great fancy to this little uncle, placed her hand through his arm, and gave the promise.

"I didn't tell your sisters," said the old gentleman, "because I felt that they wouldn't understand. Dear girls, nice girls, sweet girls; but not mischievous and wicked like you!"

They were making their way down one of the steep streets of Bath, Aunt Isabella's poodle grunting ahead of them at the end of a lead which Uncle David held in one of his woollen-gloved hands. Laura was a head taller than this little ivory-faced clergyman, who walked mincingly and thrust his head forward with a peering expression in the pale eyes.

"Now, wait a minute," he said, pausing before a confectioner's window. "I think a few sweets might be useful."

When they left the shop the pockets of Uncle David's overcoat bulged with paper bags, and Laura carried an oblong box of chocolates in her muff.

"And now for the secret!" said he, turning down a narrow alley which seemed to be perfectly familiar to the poodle.

Laura found herself in a mean street, a veritable slum. The houses were small and shabby; the road swarmed with ragged children; at the doors of the dull houses slatternly women lounged in gloomy gossip, with a sour and miserable expression on their hard faces. Such a

noise rose from this dark street! And the atmosphere was stifling with unpleasant odours.

"This is where my friends live," said Uncle David, nodding to some of the women, who bobbed their heads at him without shifting their position. "You needn't be afraid," he whispered; "they're a little primitive, but not savage." At that moment he was surrounded by grimy children, some of whom caressed the poodle, while others boldly asked for coppers and sweets. They appeared to treat Uncle David as a joke, laughing at him while they made their demands, even pulling at his coat and pretending to pick his pockets.

When he had parcelled out some of the sweets and distributed a handful of coppers among these noisy gutterlings, he led the way to a house at the end of the alley where a respectable-looking woman was standing at the door with a baby in her arms. "So you've brought a friend with you," said this woman, glancing at Laura; "well, I hope she won't mind a little dirt, for I've had no time this morning to do much tidying; George has gone to the hospital again — his leg's terrible."

In a back upstairs room of this miserable dwelling, lay a little twelve-year-old girl on a filthy bed — a little sallow-complexioned, peak-faced, narrow-eyed, and long-lipped child whose whole experience of life was the agony and deprivation of paralysis. At Uncle David's entrance her eyes brightened, and her long lips broke into a generous grin, disclosing uneven and discoloured teeth.

"This is Sally," said Uncle David, "the Queen of Bath, because she is the bravest soul in the place." The poodle put his front paws on the bed, and snuffed at the child, who placed a shrunken arm round its neck and tried to turn her face that the dog might lick it.

On their way home Uncle David said to Laura: "If your dear aunt knew that I went into these dirty places she would be cross; but if she knew I took Perkins (the poodle) into such streets and into such houses, she would be quite angry. So we must be secret."

Aunt Isabella was a drawing-room Christian. She liked the world, and she had no faith in people who abused it. Abuse of the Radicals and the working-classes was justifiable, was indeed a religious and a national duty; but abuse of the world was a sin. God had ordained the spheres of society; Christ Himself had said, "The poor ye have always with you"; fantastic theories of levelling up amounted to impiety; she thought people should keep their places and do their duty in that state of life.

At the same time she herself was not altogether satisfied with the way in which things had been ordered. She was a robust, common-sense worldling, and uttered hedonistic ideas in a manner that implied her desire to be overheard by an eavesdropping Providence, of Whom apparently she entertained no very high opinion. She felt, in fact, that the Almighty should do a great deal more to keep people in their places. She seemed to think that it would do Him good to hear what she thought about the matter.

Soon after her marriage to rich Mr. David Bevan, this robust lady had discovered that he was doing considerable harm in his little parish by indiscriminate charity. He was encouraging the peasants, in her opinion, to think that twelve shillings a week was not enough for the needs of a family. She determined to save the village from ruin, and protesting that the place did not suit her, carried her husband off to Bath, where she settled herself down very comfortably to a life of fashion,

and made it her business to see that her husband's subscriptions to begging charities in London were kept within reasonable bounds.

She sent her two sons to Eton, and engaged the best governesses, drawing-masters, singing-masters, and dancing-masters for her three daughters. One of her sons was now beginning to make a reputation at the Bar, the second was struggling to live on his allowance of three hundred a year in a regiment of hussars. All the daughters, after passing from the finishing governess to the completing dressmaker, were well and safely married — people of position, with nice houses, pleasant friends, and nurseries full of happy, well-fed and well-clothed children. God had answered her prayers. The promise that the seed of the righteous should never beg their bread had been kept. Most graciously, too, the Almighty had carried her through an operation for appendicitis, and now the same benignant Power was doing what It could by means of Bath water and other remedies to cure her of the gout. She herself had no cause of grievance against the Infinite; but when she looked about the world and saw how people were permitted to question things, to speak evil of dignities, and even to make religion a kind of dreadful socialism — oh, then, the red and puffy cheeks of Aunt Isabella flamed with indignation, and her little brown eyes shone with the wrath of the fatted calf.

Laura discovered that Uncle David was a silent and secret person in this comfortable house, a furtive criminal of God, who used his insignificance as a cloak, and made his unimportance a mask for righteous hypocrisy. He stole from the sideboard, the larder, and the wine-cellar for the sick and needy in the slums of Bath, and quite unknown to his wife he possessed a private cheque-book which he used for the purposes of charity. "Your dear

aunt," he said to Laura, smiling and blinking his eyes, "considers that a guinea to the C.M.S., a guinea to the S.P.C.K., and a guinea to Dr. Barnardo's Homes is a sufficient contribution for us to make to the sufferings of our fellow-creatures. The dear thing does not perceive that half the joy of giving is lost when one does it through an organisation. Giving, in fact, is not merely a duty; it is a pleasure. Don't tell anyone, it is my only hobby!"

Between these two old creatures, so antithetical and so amusing, Laura spent a very agreeable time in Bath, liking the comfortable house, liking the place, and liking the people she met. She went to concerts and dances, for her year of mourning had now passed, and made many acquaintances with people who distracted her mind from its obsession of loneliness and failure.

Among these acquaintances was a middle-aged man of easy fortune, who, in spite of a bald head and a beard sprinkled with grey, preserved his youth more or less successfully in those spirits of wine of human nature which we call Cheerfulness. This person, Mr. Frederick Slee, had lived the greater part of his immoral and undisciplined life in the Argentine. He was a widower, and his children were off his hands. He had a kind eye, an indulgent smile, and a voice that was full of pleasantness. In spite of the gout, which sometimes laid him by, he was a vigorous, active, well set-up man of eight-and-fifty — not scholarly, but refined; not particularly interesting, but a gentleman as one counts gentlemen nowadays.

Laura liked this pleasant Mr. Slee, and it became every day more certain that his liking for her was waxing into something of a decidedly romantic character. Aunt Isabella noticed it soon after Laura herself became aware of the new element in this intimacy. "My dear," said

the aunt, "it would be a splendid match for you — *splendid!*" She enlarged on his fortune, spoke of the fashionable life his wife would enjoy, and discoursed eloquently on the peace and security of an old man's love. And always she wound up by exclaiming, "Besides, he isn't old at all. He's in the prime of life. I believe if he was to rub paraffin oil on his head he'd get all his hair back in a month or two."

At first it was a delicious thought to Laura that she might yet be married, might yet become a mother. She would fall asleep smiling over this beautiful idea. She thought of it in her bath, thought of it as she brushed her hair, thought of it as she dressed, and kept it warm and secret at her heart till she undressed again for bed. And there came into her face a new softness and a fresh warmth — so that the "pugginess" of her youth, and the sadness of her early womanhood, gradually departed, and she became lovely with a tenderness, an excitement, and a hope which were wondrously becoming.

But this sensation of joy was only real and suffusing in her solitude. It flooded away from her, leaving her cold and apprehensive, when the elderly lover was at her side. Nature rebelled against the idea of such a union. She shrank from it. It was to her like a perversion.

The elderly Frederick was a most engaging person as a *raconteur,* as a companion, as a dance partner, as a dinner neighbour: but when in lonely places he drew his chair a little nearer and lowered his voice to a suggestive modulation, he became an Ifrit to the young and radiant girl at his side. He served very well in the abstract as a hypothetical husband, but, in the concrete, as an actual lover, he was full of affright. She could not think of giving herself to this old gentleman. She could not bring herself to the thought of loving him. Liking she already had for him; affection might come;

but love — that mysterious and rapturous passion of soul and body — no, that was impossible.

And yet she had to face the unpleasant and unflattering truth of things. She was six-and-twenty. Girlhood lay behind her. The vista of the years into which she looked with baffled eyes was not avenued by beseeching suitors and kneeling adorers. The young men who said pretty things to her at dances did not propose. If any young woman of her time was drifting into the melancholy ocean of spinsterhood surely it was she. A derelict woman — what a dismal catastrophe!

One night at a dance, Mr. Slee said to her, "I intend to pay Cambridge a visit in the spring. I have never been there. Until I met you I never had the least desire to see King's Chapel, the Backs, and Parker's Piece." He laughed and smote his gloved hands together. "You see I've been reading it up!" he exclaimed jovially. "Let me see, which is the College with the wonderful plate and the fine old Buttery?— St. John's, isn't it? Ah, I'm a clever fellow! But, tell me, Miss Thornton," he lowered his voice, rested his huge hands, which appeared to be bursting in their white gloves, on the curve of his knees, and turning his lined and copper-coloured face towards her, inquired significantly, "will you be glad to see me in Cambridge?"

"Of course," said Laura hastily; "and I'm sure you'll enjoy it; the town is —"

"Very well, then, very well. I'll come. In the spring."

For six weeks Laura lived in the fear and expectation of this visit. At one moment (he was now far away from her) she almost anticipated his arrival with excited pleasure; but at the next, she trembled to think that she would have to give him a definite answer. The home-

life was dull; she felt no scruple about escaping from it; but her craving for love was so vital and insistent that she loathed the thought of laying herself into the embrace of this widower old enough to be her father.

Blake Thornton had become more morose than ever, thanks to the influence of whisky on a lazy liver and a rebellious indigestion. Mrs. Thornton was worn to death in her ceaselessly frustrated effort to find husbands for her daughters. The last pigtail had been put up, the last pinafore had been put away; the house was now crowded with marriageable daughters, and an atmosphere of strain pervaded the establishment; no one could have called it a happy home.

King wrote occasional letters to Laura from the Punjàb. He hated the Indian climate, disliked the people he met, and loathed his life of policeman. Rose now and again wrote from Buda Pesth, Vienna, Dresden, or Paris, giving cheerful accounts of herself and the life she was leading, now as companion, now as governess, and now as free lance in an economical Pension. Two of the younger sisters were straining at the leash to follow her example.

Laura's one pleasure was paying visits to the nursery of Olive, where two delightful babies scrambled up from the floor to run and greet her with shouts of joy.

A week before Mr. Slee's arrival, Laura was one afternoon playing in the nursery with these children when Olive appeared and asked her to come down to tea, saying, "A friend of Herbert's is here; an amusing boy from India; I think you'll like him." On the way downstairs, Olive said, "I do hope mother won't try and rush him for one of the girls; she's getting quite a name for that sort of thing; it's not fair on us." She put her hands to her hair and asked Laura if she looked tidy.

Tea was served in the drawing-room, where a fire was burning and where the windows were closed. It was a warm and comfortable room, commonplace enough in its furniture and hangings, but pleasant with a genuine note of homeliness. The tea-table with its spirit-kettle and pretty china seemed to laugh at the wind and rain outside. The dish of hot cakes in the fireplace added, with the purr of the yellow coals, an enchanting note of domestic happiness. With Olive at the tea-table, and Laura sitting on a stool beside the bright fire, this little interior could not fail to make a very agreeable impression.

The door opened, and a boyish voice came to Laura saying, "You must let me see the children, Herbert. I'm frightfully keen on kids. What are they? A boy and a girl?"

Laura rose from the stool, and half turned to the door.

"Come and have some tea, Mr. Ashworth!" said Olive.

"Ah, here's Laura!" exclaimed Herbert.

"Laura," said Olive, "this is Mr. Ashworth. My sister, Miss Thornton."

He was quite a boy, fresh-coloured and brown-haired, with rather merry eyes and one of those smooth and untroubled faces which seem to be made expressly for smiles. He bowed to Laura, crumpling a handkerchief between his two hands, and then turned to Olive with a radiant face. "You can't think how perfectly ripping this all is after India," he said pleasantly. "There's one word that can never be applied to poor old India, and that's the word *cosey*. I see the French have borrowed it from us. I wish we could make it suitable to India."

Everything pleased him. The tea was delicious. Hot

cakes, by George! Such bread and butter, too. People in England didn't half know how well they were off.

He was perfectly at his ease without being affected. There was nothing of boredom in his manner. He was a boy rejoicing in his boyhood, a man unfrightened by responsibilities. It was impossible not to feel warmly drawn to this good-looking and natural youth, who was the very soul of cheerfulness and good-nature.

He made them laugh with his stories of life in India. He made no boast of his shooting and pig-sticking, but told them of the odd contrivances which people have to make in domestic life. He praised the English women out there, who not only bore the climate splendidly, but never tired of trying to make life cheerful and comfortable for other people.

The room got hotter and hotter.

When the tea-things were taken away, the children came hand-in-hand and rather unwillingly into the room. The little girl hung back with a finger in her mouth; the little boy on tip-toe, a step in advance, glanced about him uneasily, avoiding the stranger.

They both made a sudden run for Laura, and plunged their faces into her lap — the boy fingering the buttons of her loosened jacket and saying, "Why didn't you come upstairs, Aunt Laura?"

"By George, Herbert! they're perfectly ripping," said the young soldier in an undertone.

He came over to them presently. "You seem to be a real favourite, Miss Thornton," he said, smiling. "Tell me, what's the Open Sesame?"

She turned the boy round and told him that Ashworth had just come home from India, where the elephants and the tigers live in the jungle.

"Real ones?" asked the child; and in another moment Ashworth had the boy on his knee, while the girl,

with a hot cheek against Laura's dress, watched him and listened.

The room got hotter and hotter.

A lamp was brought in, the curtains were drawn, and the fire was made up. "We smoke in here," said Herbert, producing a cigarette case.

"Oh, ripping!" exclaimed Ashworth; and glancing from Olive to Laura he asked over the boy's head, "You're sure you don't mind?" His eyes rested on Laura, in what was almost a stare.

Seen by the lamplight he was handsomer than Laura had imagined. His brow was broad and strong, the nose was straight and refined, nothing could have been more correct and withal charming than the small mouth. He had one of those clear skins which take wind and sun with delight. His hair was a dark and happy brown. There was beauty of a high order in the large eyes under their straight brows.

Laura fell in love with him then and there. She was conscious, indeed, of irresistible attraction. This boy was her Romeo fresh from the roseate heavens, a young god glowing in a thousand charms. Could anything be more dazzling to a woman's soul than those great eyes of his overflowing with youth and good-nature? His voice — how it beat upon her heart like seductive music! His mouth, was it not fashioned for love? His strong neck, his broad shoulders, his brown hands, his straight legs, every movement of the man, every gesture, every detail — a god's!

She could not keep her eyes from him.

Perhaps it was not altogether the charm of this agreeable young man enjoying his furlough in England which created such sudden enthusiasm in the heart of poor Laura. Perhaps her fear of the middle-aged lover inspired in some way the rush of her hopes towards this

younger man, investing him with a purely subjective divinity. One must remember that she felt herself menaced by a most dislikable destiny. She had been living for the past weeks on the borders of hysterics. She had been miserably unhappy. But allowing for all this, she was profoundly conscious of a fascination, and felt herself drawn towards Ashworth by a strong and genuine attraction. And Ashworth was in truth a most agreeable person, however short he came of divinity.

Olive went from the room to see about the dinner, soon after her husband had excused himself for a few moments. They were left alone with the children.

He looked at her and asked frankly, "Don't you adore children?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"That's the hardest part of India for a woman," he said, smoothing the boy's curls. "It's no country for children. They have to go home. And then the women are left alone. Only the husband!"

He turned to the boy and told him what a lucky fellow he was to have a mother to look after him.

"And Auntie Laura, too!" cried the boy.

"Oh, yes! and Auntie Laura, too!" laughed Ashworth.

Their eyes met, and for a moment they seemed to be very near one another.

Olive returned, and a moment after Laura rose to go.

"Why not stay to dinner?" asked Olive, putting her hands on Laura's arms.

"Oh, do!" said Ashworth impulsively. Then he laughed. "What cheek!" he confessed. "But I hate breaking up anything that's so nice as this."

"Yes, do stay, Auntie Laura!" pleaded the children; "and then you can hear our prayers."

So Laura stayed.

She took Ashworth with the children to the nursery,

and there they spent a most delightful hour — hearing all the stories of the doll's house, the menagerie of animals, and the shelf of books. He waited there while they were in the bath; sat on the edge of the tall fender while they knelt at Laura's knee and said their prayers; and carried the boy on his shoulder to the night nursery. When the candle was blown out and the night-light sent up its tiny flame from the saucer half-filled with water on the mantelpiece, he stooped over each little cot, kissed the children, and said, "God bless you, little man — God bless you, little girl."

The children called to them as they withdrew:

> "Pleasant dreams, sweet repose,
> All the bed, and all the clothes!"

They were passing out of the day nursery when the boy shouted, "Auntie Laura! Auntie Laura! I want to say something!"

"Well?" she said at the door, smiling at Ashworth.

"*Rêve de belles choses!*" he shouted.

"*Dormez bien!*" piped the little girl.

"*Rêve — de — belles — choses!*" he bawled again, much louder.

"All right, I will!" she laughed. "And now, be good children and go to sleep."

"Mister Ashworth!" called the boy.

"Well, old chap?"

"*Rêve de belles choses!*"

"*Dormez bien,*" cried the little girl.

He looked at Laura — "What perfectly ripping children!" he said, with delightful approval.

Then they went downstairs, and Ashworth thought that Laura's hair and Laura's complexion and Laura's eyes were the most beautiful things he had ever seen — perfectly ripping!

CHAPTER X

FOR a week it was as if someone had poked a ho through the floor of Paradise, so that a little shaft heavenly glory, a little flood of heavenly song, a litt distillation of heavenly odours, trickled through tl emptiness and silence of space straight into the heart Laura.

In *Port Tarascon* Alphonse Daudet describes a suns which appeared to cover everything with gooseber juice. Laura's enchantment was of a like nature. T whole world for her shone and dripped with gooseber juice.

She told herself again and again that it was too go to be true. Such joy was not real. Such bliss cou not continue. Aware of glory, she moved like one in dream, walking on air, hearing in her heart music th entranced her, and conscious in her soul of scents th drowned her feelings in a swoon of delicious ravis ment. It could not last. No one had ever known su beatitude. It was a transport that would pass like tl loveliness of flowers. Besides, it was making her ridic lous. She was like a girl of seventeen!

Everything was changed by this magic. The colle buildings became fairy palaces, the bells rang with jo the streets were crowded with happiness. She look at the trees bursting into bud, at the meadows shinir with their young green, at the patches of sunlight floa ing on the river, at the flowers thrusting themselves to the sky, at the lambs bleating in the folds, at tl calves running by their mothers' sides in the fields,

everything which came with beauty to the door of life asking for joy — and she felt in her heart a more wonderful rapture, a far diviner ecstasy, a sense of communion with all this blessedness in nature, a communion which was yet higher, grander, wider, and more heavenly than it all.

But it could not last. How could such joy endure? Nothing that she had read ever described such happiness. Nothing that she had dreamed of love ever touched this reality, which was transient because it was unearthly. She teased herself by striving to find in the poets and among the musicians anything that could express her sense of dizzy joy, and there was nothing that did not seem to her pallid, stammering, and cold.

She laughed sometimes to herself, and said: "I understand now those absurd words, subjective and objective. This love is subjective. It has no reality. It is a shadow of the brain. I have woven it out of dreams, desires, and nothingness."

But when she was with him, which was every day, and twice and thrice and four times every day, for they contrived meetings with all the daring and ingenuity of their love, these fears that her happiness was but a mocking chimera vanished from her brain, and she knew that it was true — true that she loved him, and that to love him was a rapture of delight.

But did he love her? Yes! Oh, yes! At least she was almost sure that he did. Not, perhaps, as she loved him, but still — oh, yes, he loved her. How he flattered her! What gentle, sweet things he said! How feastingly he looked at her! With what subtle longing he held her hand at parting!

Would he ask her to marry him? She felt quite certain that he was not like the man who had kissed her. There was something of nobility in this man's love.

How beautifully he spoke of women! How devoted he was to children! What a frank, kind innocence characterised every sentiment he uttered!

But would he ask her to marry him? Before it was too late?

She remembered with a shudder that a man old enough to be her father was coming to Cambridge on purpose to see her. She counted the days to his coming — with fear, anxiety, with a kind of dismal horror. What should she say to him? Worse still, what would Basil think of her when he saw this bald-head at her side?

Mrs. Thornton had said to her with asperity: "You are behaving very absurdly about this *boy*. He might possibly do for your younger sister. But how are you going to wait four or five years before he can afford to marry? Besides, this Mr. Slee you spoke to me about! He will be coming here soon. Do you think that he will like to see you — a woman of your age — running about here and there and everywhere with a little pink-faced subaltern from India?"

So that if Laura's dream had the sweetness of heaven, it also had the terrestrial bitterness of this crazy planet, where everything is awry, and where the straight road is so often paved with ennui and the dull trees so seldom drip with gooseberry juice.

On the day that was to bring Mr. Slee she met Basil Ashworth at Olive's house, and they had tea there with Olive and the children, and waited till Herbert came home. Just before seven o'clock Laura rose to go and Basil made ready to accompany her as far as her father's house. "Come back to dinner," said Herbert, helping Basil with his overcoat. Basil was dining with a man at Caius. "Well, look in afterwards, will you?" said Herbert, glancing at Laura, who was buttoning her jacket and calling up the stairs to the children leaning over the

banisters in their nightgowns. "I want to have a talk with you," he added, in a meaning tone.

As they passed from the light of the open door into the dusk, Basil said: "I wonder what old Herbert wants to say. Did you hear? He wants to see me particularly to-night. I wonder why to-morrow wouldn't do just as well. I expect it's something about the way I'm running after you! You don't mind my saying that, do you? I've no objection in the world to answering Herbert's questions. Not in the least. But I wonder why he is so suddenly anxious for a conference."

Laura's heart was beating so fast that she could not speak.

"Why are you walking at such a frightful pace?" he asked.

She came immediately to a crawl, so that he almost went past her. They both laughed.

"You're going out to dinner," she said. "Listen, it's striking seven."

"My dinner's at eight," he replied; "and I can dress in five minutes. Let us go round the other way and prolong our duet."

They walked slowly in the shadows of old houses with far-spaced lamps throwing a pale light on the cobbles of the narrow lane which curved into solitary darkness with a hint of mystery.

"May I meet you in the morning?" he asked. "I shall want to tell you what Herbert said — dear old practical Herbert."

"I'll try," she said.

"But there must be no doubt about it!" he laughed.

"A friend is coming, and I may have to —"

"What, coming to stay at your house? That's a bore!"

"No, not to stay. He's going to the University Arms.

But I expect I shall have to do some of the honours of the town."

"I wish you had told me!"

Laura kept silence.

"How delicious it is!" he said presently. "There's nothing like this in India. The nights out there are magnificent, but they haven't got this *something* of England. I wonder what it is." He looked up at the sky, drew the air through his nostrils, and sighed with content. "Ah, how good! But — if you were not here!"

"Ah, what a difference that would make!" she laughed.

"All the difference!"

"Never mind, you're going out to dinner and you'll forget my existence!"

"On the contrary, I shall be thinking of you all the time."

"You must remember to tell me the dishes!"

"But when? You are not to be visible to-morrow, apparently."

"Oh, I may be."

"You'll try, won't you?"

"I shall have to do some shopping, I expect."

"I shall come to your house if I don't see you."

"Is that a threat?"

"No; but you know what I mean. You've got such a lot of sisters. One can't talk."

"I think it would be better, all the same."

"Why?"

"Well, don't you think so?"

"Decidedly not."

"There is such a thing as proper behaviour," she laughed.

"And a much better thing than that."

"But we're behaving rather oddly, aren't we?"

"Very naturally," he said.

They both looked at each other and smiled. "I love your eyes," he said warmly.

"Do you?"

"And your beautiful hair."

"Oh, that's always untidy."

"And your voice — it's so low, and soft, and mysterious."

She sighed and averted her head.

"Has anybody ever told you how very beautiful you are?"

"Not as you tell me," she said.

"I can't help being impulsive; I really can't. You've bewitched me. Ever since I saw you —. The first time: sitting by the fire; and then they brought in the lamp and I looked across at you, and our eyes met. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Oh —." He raised his hand and put it to her arm. Almost imperceptibly she avoided him, and quickened her pace.

"Listen!" she said. "A quarter-past seven!"

"Don't hurry so!" he pleaded.

"But I must, I really must!"

"Be late for once."

"For once!"

"Well, just once more. The last time. Do!"

"You'll be late, too."

"Does it matter? Moments like these come only once in a lifetime. Oh, Auntie Laura, Auntie Laura!"— he placed his hand within her arm and half drew her to him —"you must stop. I want to tell you something."

Her heart was beating so fast that she could not trust herself to speak. She was conscious of a wild desire

to subside into his arms and lie there till her heart was quiet again and her brain was calm.

"I must tell you to-night," he said. "Stop, for a minute, and look at me with your beautiful eyes."

"No," she said, breathing hard. "I must go back. I must. Really I must."

"Don't you want to hear me?"

"Oh, please don't!"

"What is the matter?"

"I must go back. It's so late. Really I must."

"But do you know what I want to say?"

"Tell me to-morrow."

"Laura, I love you! I can't wait till to-morrow. Stop. Look at me. Look at me with your beautiful eyes. I love you."

For a moment she made a rushing effort to control herself. In that moment she turned and looked at him. Her eyes were half-closed; her red lips were swollen with feeling; there was in her face a swooning joy and a sensuous pain.

"Now, let me go," she murmured — pleading, in a whisper, scarcely moving her lips.

He felt her arm tremble, and it seemed to him that she was swaying. His brain was dazed, as his eyes were blinded, by her beauty. He felt himself dumb and paralysed. In another minute she was walking on, her face turned away from him; and a sound like suppressed sobbing came to his ears.

"Laura," he implored, "you love me? You do love me?"

"Oh, don't speak any more. To-morrow."

"But you must tell me."

She made no answer.

"Tell me, my beautiful one; you do love me?"

"Oh, I have told you."

They came from the lane into a road where people were walking and vehicles were passing.

He was frightened by the fulness of joy that had come to him. It left him with nothing to say. Everything he could think of saying seemed to him banal. He kept silence, walking in a daze at her side, and glancing surreptitiously at her bright face as he dropped behind to let her go on in a crowd of people.

When they entered the road where she lived he said to her, "You've made me the happiest man on earth."

"To-morrow I'll tell you something," she replied, with a little laugh.

"You don't think badly of me for having rushed you?" he pleaded. "I've been trying to hold myself back all the week. You can't think how difficult it has been. I loved you the first moment I saw you. No; not then. That's not true. It was when they brought in the light."

"We'll talk to-morrow."

She stopped at the gate of her home and gave him her hand. "I mustn't wait a minute," she said, glowing with joy, but not now quivering with excitement. Beautiful and calm she confronted him, one hand in her muff, the other extended to him.

"Wait till this cab has gone by," he said, taking her hand. "I want to ask you one thing."

She feared that he wanted to kiss her. "No!" she cried, laughing and shaking her head. She disengaged her hand and turned to the gate, which he hurried to open for her.

"But really," he pleaded, as she backed slowly into the shadows of the garden, smiling at him. "I want to know one thing. It's important. May I tell Herbert that you've promised to wait for me?"

The colour faded from her face. She felt herself

struck through with the sharpness of cold. Standing in the shadows of the trees she was like a ghost.

"Won't you wait for me?" he cried, in a dull agony. "Why, what have I done? What's the matter, Laura? Why won't you wait for me?"

They both started suddenly. Basil, with his hand still on the open gate, turned his head. Laura in the shadows stared over his shoulder.

The cab had stopped.

While they stood there the door of the cab opened and Frederick Slee descended in evening dress, a light coat over his arm and a cap in his hand. The light of the street lamp shone upon his bald head. "What's the fare?" he demanded, feeling in his pocket.

Then he saw them. First the handsome boy, then, just inside the open gate, the beautiful girl in the shadows of the trees.

For a moment he was surprised and stood looking from one to the other. Then he came forward. "Miss Thornton!" he exclaimed, and put out his hand. "You were not at home when I called this afternoon. Your mother kindly asked me to dinner, that I might have the pleasure of seeing you. I'm glad to meet you again. I've brought you heaps of messages from Bath. No end of them!"

He glanced at Basil, and turning back from the gate, carried a handful of silver to the carriage lamp.

"How much did you say?" he inquired, looking up at the cab-driver.

CHAPTER XI

"THIS has got to stop," said Mrs. Thornton, nippingly, like an east wind with ice in it.

The dinner was over. Mr. Slee had gone back to his hotel. Blake had retired to his study. The younger sisters, well aware that Laura was "in for it," had been sent up to bed. Laura and her mother occupied the drawing-room alone.

The gas-brackets, on either side of the gilt mirror above the mantelpiece, supported on their corroded galleries, rose-tinted globes flowered with vine leaves and bunches of grapes through which the staring light came but little softened into the room with its drawn curtains, its brocaded furniture, its yellow carpet, its dado of bookshelves, and its white-papered walls spaced out with small pictures in ample mounts and narrow frames.

Laura was standing in the centre of this room, sad, sorrowful, and guilty. Her simple morning dress, with its short skirt and rumpled blouse — for she had arrived too late to change even her boots — added to the guiltiness of her expression. Mrs. Thornton, on the other hand, tall, spare, and dignified, dressed in black, with her throat bare, her neat hair bound by a new velvet ribbon, and the long train of her robe flowing with a certain imperious note over the carpet, had the appearance of an inexorable judge.

"This has got to stop," said she, and fixed her eyes on guilty Laura.

Mrs. Thornton had grown thinner with age. Save for the innumerable fine wrinkles in her face and the

tendency of the eyes to narrow and withdraw themselves, she looked almost as young as the day on which she was married. The face still preserved its fresh colour, its softness, and its elegance. The brown hair was untouched by grey, and had lost nothing of its lustre. If anything, time and the care of her life had imparted only dignity and grace to the outward form of this vigorous spirit.

The change was in her mind. She was no longer the author of anthropological primers. She was no longer the pleasant companion of scholars and savants, no longer a woman of culture and refinement. For a quarter of a century she had done little but go to and fro between the kitchen and the tradesman, her only literature the bills and books of her domestic economy, her only outlook on the universe the fortunes of her family. She had suffered a sea change. Mrs. Thornton, never at any moment of her life a religious or a particularly gentle soul, had become hard, bitter, and a little vulgar. She had found the world hard, and there was nothing in her philosophy of life to soften it.

"If you could only see yourself!" she exclaimed, looking Laura up and down. "A nice way to appear at dinner! And to be found by the man who wants to marry you standing at the gate, talking to a boy, out in the streets at night — like a shop-girl or a servant!"

She walked to the open piano, plucked away a piece of music, dropped it on the stool, and closed the lid of the instrument, whose strings and candle-brackets slightly vibrated under the shock of this action.

"Let us clearly understand one another. I forbid this roaming about the streets altogether. In future, you will come in every afternoon to tea, and you will remain at home till you go to bed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, mother."

Mrs. Thornton picked up the sheet of music, carried it to a stand beside the window, and placed it in one of the shabby cases of black cardboard. The train of her dress dragged behind her with an angry indignation.

"Whether you have disgusted Mr. Slee," she said, putting a chair straight, "I do not know; he did not seem to me to be quite at his ease; I noticed how he watched you, suspiciously; but let me tell you this, if you *have* driven him away by your vulgarity and commonness, you've done the most foolish action of your life. I'm certain of that!"

"But I don't want to marry him," said Laura weakly, twisting a handkerchief in her two hands and looking down at this unimproving work with flushed cheeks and rather sulky eyes.

"Don't want to marry him!" cried Mrs. Thornton. "Do you know what you say?"

"I don't care for him."

"You're old enough not to talk nonsense of that kind."

Laura half raised her head, but did not look at her mother. She looked at the china ornaments on the mantelpiece and went on twisting the handkerchief in her hands. "I shall never marry a man I don't love," she said sullenly.

"Let me ask you. Did you love poor Laurence?"

"I was younger then."

"Pray stop worrying with your hands. I can't think how it is you're so entirely without dignity. Sit down, please."

Mrs. Thornton walked to the hearth-rug and, standing at a corner of the mantelpiece, fixed a displeased and critical glance on Laura in morning dress seated in a low chair, with her walking boots plainly, repulsively visible.

"A young girl," she said, "has some excuse for talking romantic nonsense about love. A woman of your

age has none. You have had experience of life. You entered into a most unfortunate engagement, which ended tragically. All through those years of waiting you were on our hands; we made no complaint; we denied ourselves that you might live in comfort; never once did either your father or I reproach you with a single thing. And now, after all these years of disappointment, when a most happy and providential opportunity occurs for you to show us how you appreciate our kindness, you behave exactly like a wilful girl in her teens, and talk about love! How can you treat us in this way? Mr. Slee is a man that both your father and I heartily approve of; he is a gentleman, he is well off, and although by no means old he is past the time of life when men are foolish and improvident. Married to such a man, your happiness is absolutely secured. You would go about the world, you would see cities and countries, you would travel in luxury and everywhere you would live in comfort. You would have a fine house, carriages, and motor-cars, you would entertain, you would know nice people, and you would be able to have your sisters to stay with you. And all this — this *Paradise,* you would throw away for a whim! I can't think you are serious. I can neither believe that you are so wanting in sanity nor that you are so lacking in duty."

Laura scarcely heard a word of this exordium. She was thinking of Basil's words, *You will wait for me?* which had so suddenly eclipsed the brightness of her sky, which had haunted her all through dinner, and which were now more terrible to her soul than the scorn and rasping censure of her mother.

To wait — for how long? Her life would be made a torture to her. How could she remain, how could she *hang on* in this home where she already lived like a guest who has outstayed his welcome? And besides, she loved

ardently and with all the force of a long pent-up passion. Was she not conscious that her whole nature clamoured and craved for love? Could she wait? Could she begin again that dull and wearing tragedy of a long engagement?

"Have you nothing to say?" demanded her mother.

Laura's hands began to fidget with the handkerchief in her lap.

"Sulking doesn't suit you. It's bad enough in a girl. In a woman of your age it's repellent. Pray come to your senses and act like a rational creature."

Laura dropped the handkerchief, placed her elbows on her knees, leaned forward in her chair, and with her hands pressed against the sides of her face, her eyes looking straight before her into the fireplace, exclaimed, with something like vehemence, "I'd rather beg my bread than marry a man I don't love!"

"And that is very much what I think it will come to," said Mrs. Thornton, with asperity.

"Well, let it!" cried Laura, looking suddenly up. Her heart was beating fast, and she was conscious of fear, but she said again, meeting her mother's angry eyes, "Well, let it!"

"You seem beside yourself!"

Laura rose. "You may say what you like, mother; you may be as cruel and unkind to me as you choose; but I will never marry a man I do not love. I'd rather starve. Far rather!" Her eyes were full of tears; her lips were trembling.

"No one has the least wish to be cruel or unkind to you," said Mrs. Thornton, icily enough. "It's entirely for your own sake that one points out to you the extraordinary good fortune, the quite extraordinary good fortune, which fate has placed in your way, and which you so wilfully, it seems to me, are inclined to tread under

your feet. Consider for a moment, calmly if you can, the difference between Mr. Slee and this young man you've suddenly picked up — one might almost say in the streets! On the one hand, instant comfort, security, respectability, even luxury. On the other, an indefinite engagement, years of waiting, and then poverty in a frightful climate like India. I don't know how far you've gone with this youth, but if you've encouraged him — a woman of your age — you've not only been foolish for yourself but exceedingly cruel to him. How far have you gone? Has it got to anything more than a barmaid's coquetry or a servant-girl's philandering? Has it reached the point of a serious entanglement? Do you talk solemnly to each other of love and marriage? Or is it still merely a giggling matter of flattery, hand-squeezes, and oglings?"

Laura said nothing.

"I think you have known this boy for about a week?"

Laura looked at her mother.

"Well, are you going to speak?"

The girl lowered her eyes. "You wouldn't understand me," she said.

"At least let me make the experiment."

"I've told you I will never marry a man I don't love. I don't love Mr. Slee. He's old enough to be my father. I don't even like him. I simply *won't* marry him, whatever you say!"

"And this other lover?"

"It doesn't matter. I won't marry Mr. Slee. I'd rather die."

"Be so good as to answer my question. Do you consider yourself engaged to the boy you've been walking about the streets with for the last week?"

"He's a friend of Herbert's!"

"Keep your temper, and reply to my question."

"If he asks me to marry him —"

"So you haven't yet worked him up to that?"

"He has asked me —"

"Well?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. It's no use discussing it. You wouldn't understand; you'd only say something cruel and unkind. I and King have always been treated like that."

"He has asked you to —? Kindly tell me."

Laura, who was now as angry as a rat in a trap, raised her face and met her mother's scrutiny. "He has asked me to wait for him," she said doggedly; "and I will!"

"Oh!"

"There's nothing wicked in that!"

"Perhaps not. But there's rather more foolishness and madness in it than I should have thought possible in a great girl of your age, especially after such an experience as you have had already of a long engagement. However," Mrs. Thornton turned and lowered one of the gas-jets, "we won't discuss the matter any further to-night. All I can tell you is this: you have shown yourself to me in your true character — a wilful, ungrateful, and extremely stupid person. I shall talk the matter over with your father. We shall have to come to an understanding. Now kindly open that door, while I turn out the other light."

Laura slept but ill. She was excited and miserable. Her brain ran away with her. She imagined an endless succession of catastrophes. Her mother's stinging irony and brutal scorn had worked her up into a passion. She hated her mother. She compared her with other mothers whose daughters took to them all their troubles and cares. "She has never taught any of us to love her — only to shop, to mend, and be useful in the house." And yet,

there was truth in what she had said — a long engagement! Perhaps Basil would be killed in war or die of fever. She began to imagine interminable disasters.

In the morning she awoke feverish and rebellious. There was constraint at the breakfast table. Everybody appeared to be aware of a crisis. Mrs. Thornton had received a letter from Rose in Dinard asking for money; she made great play with that letter, talking at Laura while she addressed her remarks to Blake. The younger sisters glanced across the table at Laura while they ate in silence. A knife or a fork clattering on china made everyone start. They could hear themselves eating and swallowing.

Mrs. Thornton retired with Blake to his study. The sisters departed to their housework — one to dust the drawing-room, another to help in making the beds, a third to discuss catering with the cook. Laura began to put the breakfast dishes together.

In a few minutes Mrs. Thornton returned to the room. "Your father wishes to speak to you in the study," she said sharply.

Blake was sitting in a low arm-chair beside the window, with a golf-club between his legs, which he was slowly cleaning in an atmosphere of tobacco smoke. Without stopping in this operation and without taking his pipe from his mouth, he said to Laura: "Well, young woman, what's this I hear about you and your lovers?"

Laura feared her father. His views of life were like a great brutal wall between his mind and her heart. She felt him to be inhuman. He had, what was said of Rousseau, *a little goitre in his voice;* not a single sentiment or idea ever came from him which did not become more terrible and offensive for the way in which it was expressed. There are men who can make a thought,

which is quite innocuous in the mouths of other people, savage, murderous, and infernal by the manner of its utterance.

He did not ask her to sit down, and he did not look at her. Still polishing his club, his fiery face wreathed in smoke, he said, "What do you wish to say to me?"

After a moment Laura replied nervously, "Mother said you wanted to speak to me."

"What do you wish to say to me?" he repeated, more slowly and in a slightly higher tone of voice.

"I've got nothing to say."

"Come!"

"Well, if it's about Mr. Slee—"

"Do you know what Vauvenargues says about us? *All men are born truthful and die deceitful.* Get back as far as you can to your childhood. Don't, at any rate, attempt to fence with me. Come, now, the truth!"

Laura remembered how King had been flogged and kicked about this terrible room, "like a beastly footstool." She was paralysed by apprehension and was utterly unable to get control of herself.

"I understand," said her father, "that you have been behaving during the past week disgracefully. I understand that you now wish to behave, if we allow it, in a grotesquely stupid manner. Is that the truth or is it not?"

Laura could not help it, she began to cry. In the centre of the little dark smoky room, she stood weeping softly with her handkerchief to her eyes.

"You have encouraged one man, a desirable man, and when matters are to all intents and purposes settled, you think you are free to throw him over for somebody else who has happened to please your fancy during the last twenty-four hours. That is the conduct of a courtesan. I don't permit it in my daughters. You will abide by

your engagement. Mr. Slee is here to offer you marriage. You will marry him."

For several moments the only sounds in the room were Laura's whimpering and the bubble of nicotine in the bowl of Thornton's pipe. The rag passed over the golf-club without sound.

"Do you understand?" asked Thornton, without looking at her and without lifting his voice.

"I have not encouraged Mr. Slee," murmured Laura.

"If that were true, he would not be here."

"You don't believe anything I say!"

"So, you understand, I insist that you behave honourably. The man is here to offer you marriage. I shall approve of no other husband for you. You either marry him, or you marry nobody."

A feeling of despair seized upon Laura's heart. "I will *not* marry him!" she cried, with the tears overflowing her eyes. "I shall tell him I don't love him."

"Then you had better make arrangements —"

"He won't ask me to marry him when he knows that —"

"To go as a housemaid."

"I'd rather do anything than marry a man I don't love!"

Blake Thornton put away the club and selected another, laying down his pipe on a table at his side. The smoke about his face rose slowly and drifted towards the window.

"You are making a consummate fool of yourself," he said calmly. "You are preparing for yourself a lifelong bitterness. When you look in the glass ten years hence you will remember my words. You will remember them while you are stuffing your hair with pads and painting your cheeks with a sham youth. There was once a Greek courtesan who put down her mirror in middle-age

and said, *I dedicate you to Venus, who is always beautiful.* You won't do that, but you'll use your mirror to powder away the wrinkles and shrivelled age of your face, and you'll hate it, and you'll hate yourself, and you'll taste the cup of spinsterhood to the dregs. You're a fool. You're a most ridiculous fool."

Her tears were dry. Her heart was full of anger and rebellion. She studied her father's hard, brutal, and hostile face with something like contempt in her proud eyes. If he had looked at her then he might have lost his temper, he might even have struck her.

"You say that I am to go out as a housemaid," she said.

"In a year's time; yes."

"Why not now?"

"A year's reflection will be good for you."

"I would rather go now."

"But your wishes are not my commands."

"Do you mean that you —"

He stopped polishing the club and looked at her. "Well?" he demanded; "*well?*"

"I am of age!" Laura burst out.

"Oh, yes! Long ago!"

"Well, why can't I go now? Rose has gone —"

"And is still begging for bread."

"Why do you want to keep me here? It would be better for all of us if I went. I'm not happy here. I make mother cross. You're always angry with me. I'm in everybody's way. It would be much better if I went."

"I think it would. But you shall wait here for a year, however much you may be in our way, and reflect quietly on what you are proposing to do in a moment of passion and bad temper. Mr. Slee may possibly be kind enough to give you a year to come to your senses. I will

ask him. In any case, you will require a year, I assure you, to learn the elements of earning your own living."

He glanced at the clock. At that moment the door opened, and a servant announced Basil Ashworth.

He entered the room, bright, fresh, and charming in his boyish nervousness. He went straight over to Blake with extended hand. "Forgive this early call, sir," he said, smiling; "but I had a serious talk with Herbert last night, and I thought it best, he agreed with me, that I should come and see you at once."

He turned to Laura, still smiling, and offered his hand. When he saw the look in her face he appeared perplexed and startled. He turned again to Blake. "Has Miss Thornton told you, sir?" he asked.

"Told me what?" demanded Blake. "My daughters are not in the habit of telling me their affairs."

Ashworth glanced at Laura. "Well, it's rather sudden, I admit," he said, smiling pleasantly. "These things, sir, do sometimes happen before a fellow can look round!"

"Quite so," said Blake. "But not always before the parents can look round."

The door opened and Mrs. Thornton entered, pale and implacable.

Ashworth felt himself chilled to the bone by the manner in which she received his greeting. He looked about him with a fixed smile on his lips and increasing perplexity in his eyes.

"What is the subject of this conference?" asked Mrs. Thornton.

"Well, I was beginning to explain," said Ashworth. "Last night Herbert told me that there was some feeling in the family about my attentions to Miss Thornton."

"Did he also tell you," inquired the mother, "that Miss Thornton is practically engaged to be married?"

"No! He certainly didn't!" cried Ashworth, glancing quickly at Laura.

"Because it isn't true," said Laura.

Her mother placed a hand on her arm. "Perhaps you will go out of the room," she said. "We will send for you if it is necessary."

"I am not engaged to Mr. Slee," said Laura, "and nothing in the world will ever make me marry him."

Her mother pressed her to the door.

"One moment, please, Mrs. Thornton!" cried Ashworth, following her. "Let me at least know from Miss Thornton's lips if she is willing —"

"To wait for you?" cut in the mother.

"No, to marry me. At once. I'm ready. There's no difficulty. Look here, please forgive me for the suddenness of my proposal, and all the trouble I'm causing you. I perfectly understand how annoying it must be both to you and Mr. Thornton. I'm only a youngster; I've got nothing but my pay; and you don't know anything about me or my family. It must seem pretty cool to you, my sudden bursting in on the family like this. But, after all, men do fall in love suddenly. You can't help these things. And I really do love your daughter sincerely. I'll make her a good husband. I'll do all in my power to make her happy. And if she loves me, it's surely better that she should marry me, poor as I am, than marry a man she doesn't care about. I'm sure you wouldn't force her into a loveless marriage."

Mrs. Thornton opened the door. "I'll send for you later," she said to Laura. "Wait in the dining-room."

Blake had risen. He put away his clubs, and began to gather some books together.

"Our position is this," said Mrs. Thornton quietly. "We regard Laura's original liking and affection for a certain gentleman, whom she met and saw a great deal

of in Bath, as a more practical and lasting sentiment than this caprice with which you have most unfortunately disturbed her mind during the last day or two. For her own sake, we wish her to act honourably and abide by her first opinion. It is not only that we thoroughly approve of the man, it is because, knowing her character and disposition, we realise that she is more likely to live a good and useful life with him than with a younger man unable to provide her with the comfort and luxury which her nature seems to demand. As much, really, for your sake as for hers, I would ask you to make your excuses and leave her. It is the right and honourable thing to do. It is the only action possible to a gentleman. She has encouraged this other man, and until you crossed her path she was perfectly willing, even anxious, to become his wife. It would be a shameful and a wicked thing for her to throw him over. It is a course of conduct that we cannot countenance. I have talked the matter over with her, and also with her father; both Mr. Thornton and myself consider her morally bound to Mr. Slee, and we regard whatever feeling for you she may have contracted in the last day or two as a caprice."

All the time that she was speaking, in her nipping way, this masterful lady with the little head and the narrow upright body studied the young man before her with a superior and almost a disdainful disapproval. She was like a schoolmistress dictating an apology to a naughty pupil. There was what young people call a *sniffiness* in her fine nostrils and even in her pale little eyes.

Ashworth stood before her, flushed and unhappy, his head somewhat lowered, his eyelids blinking, the suggestion of a nervous smile at the corners of his lips.

Blake Thornton, with his books in his hands, regarded the boy with frowning displeasure.

"I am sorry," said Basil, "to be the cause of so much trouble to you. But I hope you will reconsider your opinion. My love for Miss Thornton"—he blushed and smiled—"is certainly not a caprice. And I don't think her affection for me, if I may say so, is—"

"I must tell you," cut in Mrs. Thornton, "that my daughter is hysterical. She is something of a neurotic. We have had great anxiety about her."

"Still I—"

"We know her, of course, a great deal better than you do," continued the lady. "We have seen these sudden infatuations come and go."

Blake Thornton said suddenly: "The thing's ridiculous. Absurd to discuss it. You're a boy, at the beginning of your career. Marriage for you is a preposterous notion. How do you think you can support a wife?"

Ashworth's colour deepened. "Subalterns of my age, sir, do marry. I am adjutant of my regiment. My pay is as good as a captain's. And I have every reason to expect a staff appointment."

"However, you have arrived too late upon the scene," said Mrs. Thornton. "After what I have told you, you must recognise that. I am sorry for you; my husband is sorry for you. But, believe me, you will live to thank us for our discretion. Go back to your duty and make a name for yourself; leave my daughter to fulfil her honourable obligations."

Blake Thornton went to the door. "So far as I am concerned," he said, "the matter is settled. I have nothing more to say about it. Let others decide whether the idea is more ridiculous than indecent."

He opened the door, and with something of a nod to Ashworth, left the room.

"Now, sit down, Mr. Ashworth," said Mrs. Thornton, "and let me place the matter before you in a rational and sensible light."

She talked for ten minutes.

"Will you allow me to see Miss Thornton?" asked the young man.

"To say good-bye to her?"

"Well, yes, if it must be so."

"I trust you not to —"

"Oh, Mrs. Thornton, I must tell her the truth. You must let me make my position quite clear to her. I have got *my* honour to think of."

"I must remain in the room."

"If you insist."

"I hope you will not make a scene."

He smiled. "Oh, I don't think so," he said quietly.

"I have told you that she is subject to hysterics. We have to be very careful about her. There is really no purpose to be served by playing on her feelings. You have heard what my husband said. The matter is settled. I ask you to say good-bye to her in a manly and honest fashion. You can tell her that you have heard the whole story and that you consider, with us, that she is morally engaged to Mr. Slee, and that as an honourable man you therefore withdraw. All you have got to do is to spare her feelings, and to help her, if you have any respect for her, to do her duty. Now, if you wait here, I will bring Laura."

Mrs. Thornton opened the door and went into the hall. Ashworth let his breath go freely, pulled at his moustache, and took a step towards the mantelpiece. Suddenly he stopped.

The front door closed, and Mrs. Thornton's voice was heard, "I told you to wait in the dining-room. Who was that you were talking to in the garden?"

Laura's voice answered, "Mr. Slee."

Ashworth heard the mother speaking in a lower tone, but could not hear the words. Then a door closed and the only sound that reached his ears was the beating of his own heart.

In five minutes' time the door opened and Laura came in, alone.

His eyes brightened and he went towards her.

"Kiss me!" she cried in a whisper, "kiss me!"

For a moment it was as if he lived in heaven. "Tell me what has happened?" he asked, holding her in his arms.

"I am free of the other man. I told him everything. He was very kind and understood. My mother is angry. She says that I have ruined my life. But I don't care. She forbids me to marry you. She says I must wait for at least a year. Well, I will wait. You asked me last night. Yes, I will wait."

"No, we won't wait. Where is your mother? Let me see her. I'll settle matters to-day."

Late that night Mrs. Thornton said to her husband, "After all, if we give our consent and let him marry her now, he'll have to pay for her passage; whereas, if we send her out to him in a year's time, we shall have to pay for it. It's no use biting off our noses to spi—"

"Oh, let her do what she likes," growled Blake. "Anything to be rid of her."

AFTER

CHAPTER I

WHEN Laura Ashworth went on board the P. and O. steamer at Marseilles, with her husband smiling and enthusiastic at her side, she had all the feeling of a young girl setting out on a delightful adventure.

Many of the passengers who had gone round by London, and who now leaned over the side of the vessel watching the new-comers cross the sunny landing-stage and ascend the gangways to the lower deck, took pleasure in observing the happiness and good looks of this young couple, who had evidently been but lately married, and who even more evidently took such charming pleasure in each other's society.

Basil bought a bunch of carnations from one of the sunburned and bareheaded Frenchwomen standing with their flower baskets behind the barrier on the landing-stage, and as he turned once more to the ship and gave these long-stalked flowers into Laura's hands, the passengers saw how her eyes brightened and how they smiled and spoke to each other with a complete happiness. She ascended the gangway with the carnations at her face, the mouth and nose hidden in the flowers. . . .

After all, everything had happened just as she could have wished. Her mother had not only come round, but in the end had been really gentle and kind. Even her father had treated her with some little show of affection. Nothing on earth could have been sweeter than her sisters' loving-kindness. Basil's people, too, had received her with favour. Good wishes and presents had been rained upon her from every side. And now that

the rapturous happiness of the honeymoon lay behind her, and all the discontents and thousand troubles of her home-life were done with for ever, she could face existence with bright eyes and a heart free of all bitterness and uncertainty, like one who has fought a good fight and won a great victory.

Happiness had solved all her problems.

For the first day or two of the voyage she made no friends, only exchanging the fewest possible commonplaces with her neighbour at the table in the saloon. Basil was first up in the morning, and was waiting for her on the sunny side of the ship, bareheaded and in flannels, when she issued fresh and beautiful from the cabin. They walked up and down together, arm in arm of course, till the bugle sounded for breakfast. After breakfast they sat side by side in their deck chairs reading novels till noon; then they would stroll round the decks or stand leaning over the rail looking at the sea. After luncheon they would sit for a little while on deck; then go to the music-room and, at the same table, write letters to their people at home, often interrupting the difficult work of composition to consult each other about some trifling matter, or to raise their heads and watch the other people in the room. Tea came as a pleasant break in the long hours of the afternoon, and when tea was done they returned to the decks and would sit side by side studying the passengers as they perambulated round and round, some of them interesting, some of them absurd, and all of them amusing. Dinner was a great event. And after dinner they would sit for an hour in the music-room, listening to a lady who sang rather sweetly and to a man who played extremely well; and thus chastened and sentimentalised they would take to the decks, walk there very slowly and happily for half an hour, pausing at last to lean over the rail and watch the

stars, till Laura, pressing his arm gently, withdrew her hand, and said, "I am going to bed."

This simple life, this second and infinitely more delightful experience for Laura of *une égoisme à deux personnes,* suffered a slight interruption soon after the smoking peak of Stromboli and the ruined shore of Messina had been left behind. Basil was asked to play cricket on the lower deck, and left Laura to read alone. On the following day he played deck-quoits for an hour in the morning, cricket in the afternoon, and when Laura said good night to him under the stars he went to play bridge with some of the men whose acquaintance he had made at cricket.

Ladies began to talk to her. She found herself very soon on pleasant terms with a little group of married women, agreeable and kind-hearted people, who chatted together while they did needlework and were never in the least bored by the long hours between meals.

At Aden they left the steamer for the "Salsette." The sunset which greeted her there, suffusing sky, sea, and rock in transcendent glory, lingered in her heart for many years. It was as if she had passed from one world to another, as if something had come to her of which her former life had contained no faintest adumbration — a depth of feeling and a glory of solemn peace such as she had never imagined in her dreams. She stood in a pack of people, with Basil at her side, gazing into the splendour and the silence of this superb sunset which seemed to impress even the commonplace and stupid. Aden was like a watchman at heaven's gate; and Little Aden appeared like a mountain of aspiration in communion with Paradise. She felt her own soul exalted by a religious awe and a compelling sense of wonder and reverence; she felt the invisible world close to her, like an atmosphere, like the breathing of her own body.

"It will make you laugh," said Basil, "when the scallywags begin to tranship the mails!"

And she did laugh, under the gorgeous stars, and in the flare of innumerable lights, with Aden glittering in the dark like a waste-heap of diamonds, when pennies were thrown from the decks into the empty lighters far below on the dark waters, and half-naked Arabs yelled, scrambled, and fought together, like an inextricable tangle of brown worms, for the possession of these coins. But at the time, Basil's remark was a discord to her feelings. And when she had ceased to laugh at the scallywags, she remembered the sunset and thought about it.

Every day she was conscious of fresh metabolism. She felt the East come to her and take possession of her, and effect change in her soul. That wonderful sky, that sweet-glowing air, that sense of infinite distance and everlasting tranquillity — poured into her being a sense of something vast and overwhelming in nature which was full of passion and full of surrender.

She had read nothing which had ever so strangely moved and so deeply altered her. All sense of struggle, labour, effort, and difficult achievement was wanting in this overwhelming effect of remote and inarticulate nature — nature which seemed to be as far from her as the blinding blue of the sky and as indifferent to the little beatings and flutterings of her heart as the farthest star. To be resigned, to endure, to wait — and yet, in waiting, to glow and be consumed with some unutterable passion of the body — this was the sensation of the East in her soul, her soul which never more desired to strive, never more to be vexed with questions, never more to be tired with thought. A sense of peace took possession of her, but peace which was a lethargy of the reason and a swoon of the heart. She felt herself drowning in the soft warm waters of indefinite emotion.

The heat became every day more intolerable. Basil slept on deck. The air that entered the cabin was like a furnace. She woke every morning dazzled, faint, tired. The bath was only a moment's refreshment; as she dried herself the moisture of her body broke from her and made her feel weak and giddy. It was a fatigue to dress. Anything but fruit offended her at breakfast. She could do nothing but sit all day on deck, moving her chair out of the sun and feeling herself blinded by the glare that came through the awnings which shut out the sea. It was impossible to write, a trouble to read, even a nuisance to listen to gossip. She sat for hours with her eyes closed, her garments drenching, her brain burning like fire.

Ashworth was charming to her in his boyish solicitude. The tenderness of his affection was her one support. It was never difficult to thank him with a smile. Everything he did for her, every contrivance he hit upon for her comfort and ease, was done so gently, so engagingly. She was happy when he sat by her side on deck or assisted her at her toilet in the little cabin, which was so stuffy and vexatious.

They arrived off Bombay before the sun had risen. Laura, sleeping under a sheet, was wakened by Ashworth, fresh from his bath after a night's sleep on deck. A cool breeze entered the cabin from the porthole, out of which a windscoop had leaned ever since Port Said.

She felt that the ship had stopped, that the long journey was at an end, and looked about her with pleased eyes, glad of the cool air, surprised by the dim light of the dawn. Ashworth gave her an orange to eat, which he had already peeled and quartered for her, and sat on the side of her berth, smiling at his pretty wife and telling her his arrangements.

When she came on deck, which was almost entirely

occupied by mail-bags, the sun was throbbing into the sky, just above the low-lying hills, purple and blurred across the smooth sea. The line of Bombay was a confusion of towers, domes, pinnacles, and factory chimneys struggling to make themselves visible through a haze of smoke. The immense harbour was filled with shipping to the verge of the dazzling horizon — towering steamers at anchor, little sailing boats, little rowing boats, picturesque dhows with vast sails, truculent tugs, and ungainly dredgers.

After breakfast Laura and her husband went ashore in a crowded launch, sitting side by side under the awning with their hand baggage in their laps. He pointed out to her the dome of the Taj Mahal Hotel, the Apollo Bunder, the premises of the Royal Yacht Club, and some of the principal Government Buildings. There was very little to suggest the East in this confusion of fine and solid buildings, from which the smoke of innumerable factory chimneys was just beginning to lift. But for the dazzle of the sun, the almost breathless heat of the air, the heavy scent which came from the dim shore, and the helmets and sola topis of her fellow-passengers in the launch, Laura could have imagined herself approaching a commercial city in the West.

This feeling, almost of disappointment, vanished when she stood on the quay. A chattering crowd of natives thronged the landing passengers on every side. The noise was like a fair, and the garments of the people were like a pageant. The different faces, ranging from gamboge to chocolate in colour, and in expression from the lowest animalism to the most impressive dignity, immediately attracted her attention and held it in a wondering fascination. A charming old gentleman with gold-rimmed spectacles and a heavy grey moustache, who wore on his head a black and shiny erection liberally sprinkled

with tiny gold stars, something like a bishop's mitre, followed Basil, offering to exchange his English money for rupees. Basil did not stop, but as he walked, smiling and amused, bargained with this venerable Parsi for better terms. It was not until he had entrusted one of H. S. King's men with the business of clearing his big baggage, and had himself got the hand baggage through the customs, that the Parsi accepted his terms and changed the money. Laura felt pleasantly proud of her husband, who so politely and charmingly had stuck to his guns and won the day without rudeness or violence of speech.

"This is what we call a gharry," he said to her, as a dusty victoria drawn by a little lean horse came to his summons. He told the driver, a dirty-looking youth in shabby khaki with a greasy red fez worn at the back of the head, to drive to the Hotel Majestic, and away they went, out of the shadows and the coolness, into the glare and the fizzling heat of the city.

Laura was so enchanted by all she saw that the heat did not at first distress her greatly. She laughed to see absurd little wooden carts piled with bales of cotton crawling through the streets with two white bullocks, little bigger than Newfoundland dogs, under the clumsy yoke. She laughed at the towering turbans of Muhamadans, and the insignificant but highly-coloured turbans of Hindus. She laughed at beards dyed scarlet, at foreheads painted with red and white bars, at naked arms and legs, at the shouts and yells of the gharry-wallahs, and the whole strange jumble of civilisation and barbarism which is the first amazement of the visitor to India.

And Ashworth delighted in her delight, and pointed out this and that, told her the difference between the various peoples, and felt how interesting India was, while

he compared the pleasure of this second arrival in Bombay with the lonely nervousness of the first.

Amazement followed amazement. Laura found that the hotel was a large and handsome building such as one sees in London. She ascended in a lift to the fourth floor, found that a bathroom was attached to her bedroom, and, after she had bathed and changed her clothes, she descended to a wide and comfortable dining-room where Ashworth ordered a delightful tiffin.

"You had better rest after this," he said to her; "unless you would like to go for a drive through the city. I want to take you to the Yacht Club for tea. It's the thing! On Fridays a band plays, and society comes down in force to see the latest fashions from Europe. You must put on your finest!"

She elected for the drive. He took her first of all to Byculla, going through the narrow alleys congested with humanity, where the natives do their shopping and discuss the universe. The thick smells, the cloud of flies, the pestiferous dust of these bazaars, fretted and almost irritated her nerves, but she was immensely interested in the tiny windowless shops with their bright-coloured wares, and the pack of various humanity dressed in the wardrobe of the rainbow, through which the gharry-wallah screamed and bawled his way at a slow walk.

Through rather dull and shabby streets they made their way to Malabar Hill, visiting the exquisite gardens where the Parsis expose their dead in open towers like miniature Colosseums, and where odious vultures brood all day waiting for human flesh; after this visit, which laid a certain gloom upon Laura, in spite of the flowers and the noble view from the hill, they drove as far as Government House, and then returned by way of the Maidan to their hotel. The beauty of Back Bay and the pleasure of their drive beside the sea, under the shade

of superb trees, with all the pleasantness and luxury of the city on every side of them, were a joyful and a restful experience for Laura after the dust and stir of the bazaars and the gruesome oppression of the Towers of Silence.

She undressed, lay down on her bed beside the tall open windows, and with the murmur of the city in her ears, let her thoughts go where they would. It was delicious to be out of the sun, to be almost naked, to be looking at nothing, to cease to wonder and to cease to talk.

Ashworth came to call her soon after four o'clock. She did her hair, dressed in her prettiest frock, and went with him to the Yacht Club.

"I've engaged a table against the wall," he said to her; "you'll have the sea and the islands and the sunset on one side of you, and the lawn, the band, and the fashion-plates on the other!"

The sound of music came to her as she passed through the wide cool hall of the club premises, which was filled with people. At the other side they came upon the lawn. A regimental band was playing close to the club, a couple of buglers standing beside the bright circle, with a restive black buck between them. The rest of the lawn was occupied by groups of well-dressed people, while beyond them, at numerous little tables covered with white cloths, more people were taking tea in the glow of the sunset.

Ashworth was conscious that people turned and looked at Laura. He took pleasure in this general effect made by the fresh beauty of his wife. It seemed to him that her dress was magnificent, and that her hat was not too grand for a duchess; he began to speculate, with a little pride, on the sensation she would make in the regiment.

To Laura the scene was extremely diverting. She sat at their little table beside the wall, looking neither at the

sea busy with shipping nor at the interesting crowd of natives thronging the Apollo Bunder, but watching the groups of people on the lawn and the little tea-parties at the neighbouring tables. The band was playing a waltz from one of the comic operas.

"Is this really India?" she asked in a low voice, looking for a moment with a smile at Ashworth, who had been watching her.

"Rather different from the bazaars!" he said.

She nodded and turned her head to look at a handsome woman who was surrounded by men.

She began to wonder what the native servants thought of this scene. Then to speculate on the influence which England exerted on India, and the influence which India in her turn exerted on England. The two characters, the two temperaments, could not be thus close to each other without result. There was the question of religion. She wondered what the natives thought of Christianity — this Christianity on the lawn; and then for a moment it crossed her mind to wonder what the natives believed, these native servants among the tea-tables, about life and the universe.

Then she thought of the books she had read about India. "Almost every other woman in those books," she reflected, "was either an Anna Karénina or an Emma Bovary; but these women here do not look like that at all. Most of them look very good and simple women. Some are silly and vulgar in their dress, but not many. One or two, I should say, are really bad, but not like Anna; they are bad like those dreadful creatures one sees in Regent Street — they are not interesting; they are just evil, like animals. I wonder if a bad woman is really ever interesting. I dare say Anna in real life would be horrid and unhealthy. But, of course, she had never loved her husband; she had been married to an old man;

that does make a difference; poor Anna! — still, all the same, she was a mother. No; I don't think bad women are ever nice."

Ashworth leaned across the table. "Laura!" he said, quietly, to attract her attention. She smiled in greeting of his smile, and leaned towards him. "Do you know," he said in a low voice, "that you are making the very deuce of a sensation?"

"I?" she asked, genuinely astonished.

"It's your complexion," he said. "Don't you see how sallow most of the women are? I tell you what it's like — the effect you make here; it's like a new rose, a beautiful La France rose, in a vase full of dying lilies, all yellow and drooping!"

Her eyes sparkled and the colour deepened in her soft cheeks. She looked at him for a moment, and then sitting back in her chair, still smiling self-consciously, began furtively to take notice of the effect she was making.

Of course she had seen before that certain women in her immediate neighbourhood were interested in her finery, and of course she had also noticed that some of the other women walking about on the lawn had turned to look at her, rather questioningly, as if wondering who she might be. But Ashworth's words, "Do you know that you are making the very deuce of a sensation?" and the tone with which they had been whispered into her inclining ear, caused a little flutter at her heart and made her realise another side of her attractiveness.

Yes, men were looking at her — some of them with a genuine and inoffensive interest, as one looks at a beautiful picture, others with a staring and intended admiration which was not flattering. They were not only looking at her as they passed beside the tea-table and stood in groups upon the lawn — they were evidently

talking about her. She withdrew her gaze and looked at Ashworth; then, leaning towards him, she began to talk of anything that came into her head — the band, the train they were to catch, the packing of their things, and the hour of dinner.

Someone approached, lifting his hat. He was one of the men with whom Ashworth had played cricket on the steamer. Behind him came another man, elderly and jovial, a stranger both to Laura and her husband. This man was introduced to the young wife as Mr. Prescott.

"Is this your first visit to India?" Prescott inquired of Laura, ingratiatingly and with just a little paternal indulgence in his manner. As she answered, she recognised him, with a disconcerting feeling of nervousness, as one of the starers.

He began to speak with enthusiasm of Bombay, pleasantly and easily, as one who had seen the world, knew what he was talking about, and was firm-fixed in his affection. His face was red to the tone of violet; he breathed heavily as he spoke, sniffing every now and then down his nostrils.

"Laura," said Ashworth, "shall we walk a little?" — and when she had risen he made way for her to go forward with Prescott, following behind with his friend from the ship.

At the end of this promenade, when the dusk was settling on the sea, and the lights of the city were beginning to twinkle in the still air, Prescott introduced the Ashworths to his wife, and invited them to dinner. He would suffer no excuse. "My car," he said, "shall take you to the station; there's no need to dress; come just as you are; it would be a monstrous thing for Mrs. Ashworth, on her first day in India, to dine at a hotel."

"Oh, yes; you must come," said Mrs. Prescott, who

was a bountiful and ornate lady; "we'll make up a merry party for you."

It amused Laura to see with what alacrity the lady accepted the burden of arranging a dinner party in five minutes. They all went away together, laughing and rallying one another, just as the band marched off with the refractory buck at its head. "You must prepare yourself for a picnic!" laughed Mrs. Prescott, nodding to Laura as she got into the first car. "I can promise you genuine champagne at any rate," said Prescott, as he assisted her into the second.

Prescott, she discovered, was one of the rich merchants of Bombay. His house was like a palace. They dined on a broad verandah with hidden illumination in the roof, which diffused a gentle amber-coloured light. The place was filled with plants and flowers. At the foot of the stairs leading to the garden was a fountain. The air, which was cool, seemed to Laura almost oppressive with its scents.

It was a party of eight, Laura and Mrs. Prescott being the only women. Four barefoot and bearded servants in white linen and a gorgeous butler with the face of a Roman emperor waited upon them. The conversation was flippant and merry, with sometimes a flash of wit and always with a running accompaniment of laughter. The dinner itself was delightful. Laura pleased everybody because she did not talk very much and did not at all attempt to "show off." She listened, she laughed, and she looked very young and beautiful and sweet.

They drank to the bride, and called upon Ashworth for a speech, which he delivered very charmingly in about twenty words. They were drinking coffee when the butler announced the car. All the guests went to the door to see them off. They cheered and waved

napkins when the car glided away with the young couple.

As she drove with Basil to the hotel, Laura thought how kind people were in India, and how merry the dinner had been, and how pleasant it was to be rich. "Jove, what a ripping dinner," said Ashworth, who was smoking a cigar; "and isn't this a fizzer of a car?" On arriving at the fourth floor of the hotel, she was amused to see men-servants and ayahs lying fast asleep, just like dogs, on mats or even on the stone floor, beside their masters' doors. "They sleep like that in the open streets and on the platforms of railway stations," said Basil, with a cheerful laugh.

They collected their baggage, descended to the car, and drove away to the station.

The silence of the city, the mystery of its barefoot myriads moving in the shadows, its broad and noble streets, its groups of great trees, its gardens, its balconies, its twinkling lights, and its warm caressing air scented with the dust and the flowers and the night—came to the excited brain of Laura with all the softness and insubstantial witchery of a dream. She loved it, and, placing her arm through Ashworth's and leaning against him, she said how happy she was and how glad that he had married her. . . .

"I shall never cease wondering!" she said to him, at the station. The carriage with its broad lounges, its many window arrangements, and its bathroom perfectly fitted and beautifully clean, had filled her with fresh amazement.

"And we travel first-class in India," he said, unpacking a holdall, "for the same fare they ask one in England for a third-class carriage about the size of a sofa!"

As he made the beds he said to her, "We shall have

servants to do this for us later on. But, by Jove, Laura, we shall have to be a bit careful. Money has simply melted away during the last six weeks. I went over my accounts while you were asleep this afternoon. I only just had enough for the hotel and our fares. I've got about thirty rupees in my pocket to pay for our grub!"

Not till she woke in the morning, not till she was dressed, and the shutters were lowered, did Laura realise the spirit of India. It came to her slowly, wistfully, and rather ashamed; as if conscious how the sea-approach from Port Said had bewitched her and the long-Englished island of Bombay had deceived her, as if anxious not to be scolded by her beautiful eyes but to be taken to her heart for what it was worth.

The carriage, with its lamps out and the light of day streaming into it, was shabby with dust collected in the night over some three hundred miles of Indian earth. The leather seats on the sun side were already hot. The air of the carriage, in spite of open windows, was like a kitchen. Laura put her hand out to feel the wind, in the draught of the train, and found that it was soft like tepid water.

On either side of her the country stretched away in a sad monotony, pensive and gentle, almost beautiful, and almost tragic, just saving itself from the depression of desert and just missing the tenderness of green pastures. There were trees, fields full of sunny crops, wide stretches of water which shone like fire, cattle at work, peasants everywhere, little villages with painted temples in the trees, women with brazen vessels at the wells, and at almost every moment Laura's eyes were caught and startled by the rich plumage of some wonderful bird flashing in the sunlight; but over all this living and varied world, brilliant and dazzled in the light of

a morning sun, there were a brooding sorrow and an everlasting meditation, as if the fields had never echoed to the shout of playing children, as if no girl had ever danced there, sung there, or loved there, as if no one had once laughed there from the dawn of creation. The great kites, sailing in the air like eagles, and the cranes standing motionless at the side of the tanks, seemed to her the emblems of a world waiting for death. It was to Laura a land where people always moved slowly and sadly at work which had long ago ceased to interest them, a land which had become a prison, a world where life had definitely conquered and enslaved humanity. The resignation and sadness of it came to her soul; and she felt that henceforth time would move very slowly for her, that nothing would ever happen, that she would lie quite still, with nothing to do, nothing to wish for, lie still and grow old without caring.

All day they travelled; and yet Laura did not tire of studying the monotony which oppressed her. She was surprised to find that she was fascinated by this infinite sadness, surprised that what hurt her and disappointed her, held her attention absolutely.

"What do you think of India?" Basil asked presently, getting to the end of a chapter in his book.

"I don't know yet," she answered.

"It's not very like the books about it!" he said, stretching his legs and taking out his cigarette case.

"Not in the least."

He stifled a yawn. "I hope," he said, as he struck a match, "that you won't find it dull with the regiment." When his cigarette was lighted he looked at her with a pleased smile and added, "You'll certainly create a sensation."

"Does anything do that out here?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

She only laughed.

"I'm afraid the domestic arrangements may try you," he said. "Servants are a frightful bother. And it's wellnigh impossible to get decent food. We eat tinned butter! As for mutton, it's mostly goat. But Mrs. Toynbee will help you. She's a real good little woman."

"We shall get on all right," said Laura, turning to the sunset.

"Look at those monkeys!" exclaimed Basil. "By George, aren't they rippers! Big as greyhounds. Look how they gallop!"

When the monkeys were left behind, he returned to his book, and Laura once more resumed her communion with the spirit of India.

At a well raised above the level of the earth, she saw bullocks ascending a steep incline while the dripping leather bag of water was emptied by half-naked peasants into a trough connecting with the fields. A little farther on she saw a string of camels moving along a road bordered by beautiful trees, the last camel drawing an extraordinary vehicle which seemed to effect a compromise between a fire-escape and a sentry-box. Then in the distance she saw women moving in Indian file across the glimmering green fields, some of them carrying sheaves on their heads and others supporting on their shoulders, against their hips, and on their heads vessels of brass, which shone in the crocus-light of the sunset. The beautiful carriage of these women, the dignity of their movements, and the rich colours of their drapery, pleased her and made her think of the lawn at the Yacht Club. Every now and then the train passed a village of mud huts with palm-leaf roofs—hovels without windows, their brown walls shining redly, almost like copper, in the sunset. On the bare earth surrounding these habitations she saw naked boys

and girls sprawling in the dust, among fowls that looked soiled and half-starved, and among lean, long-snouted, ash-coloured pigs that filled her with instinctive horror. At the marge of white tanks, or in the middle of broad-bedded rivers she saw creatures which looked at first like hippopotami, but which she saw presently were buffaloes, nearly the whole body under water, only the staring eyes, rounded brow, and hideous elongated muzzle of these repulsive slate-coloured creatures really visible above the water. It amused her to see quite small children armed with long sticks waiting for the buffaloes to come out from the water and be driven home to the shelter of the village. In strange contrast with the wretchedness of these domestic animals and these miserable villagers, were the superb peacocks strutting in the jungle, the lovely roller, miscalled blue-jay, flashing wings like Oxford and Cambridge flags in the golden air, and the kingfishers in the reeds of the canals. Even little King Crow, eternally perched like a note of music on the telegraph wires, seemed grand and majestic in comparison with the buffaloes, the swine, and the humanity.

Basil turned and switched on the lights in the carriage, and all the solemn calm and wistful beauty of the twilight receded into a false dimness and lost their charm. Laura put up her feet, closed her eyes, and gave herself up to thought.

They travelled all night and arrived at Garampur Cantonments just before nine o'clock in the morning.

Before the day was at its noon, Laura had been greeted by Mrs. Toynbee, had been presented to the regiment, and was installed mistress of the furnished bungalow henceforth to be her home.

"Bombay," she told herself that night, "was a door-

way; the journey was a vestibule; and this — is the prison."

But she was bright and vivacious with Basil, and told him that they would be very happy. Indeed, she felt in herself that if the life in the bungalow and in the cantonments was to be rather narrow and monotonous all the more did it behove her to live in the front rooms of her soul, with the windows wide open, and a rose always on the sill.

CHAPTER II

THE little white-washed bungalow, with its dull-red tiles and its blistered verandah, crouched in a small, dusty, and arid compound where one melancholy tree alone bore witness to the earth's possibilities as a convenient source of vegetable production. The bungalow looked as if some ground floor and first floor had already sunk below the level of the dust, and as if it was only a matter of time before what remained of it — the low wall and subsiding roof — disappeared into the same indifferent oblivion. As for the poor tree, it stood solitary in the dreary waste like a sad, shabby, and shamefaced witness for the defence, mindful of the Public Prosecutor. One could see on the most casual inspection that it was aware of absurdity, conscious of solecism, and convinced of futility. It was no more a tree than is the perch in a parrot's cage. It had no real use for itself; one might say that it existed only as a roosting place for squirrels. The bungalow and the tree confronted each other all day, but with closed eyes. They said nothing, for they had long ago exhausted conversation. Neither of them knew which was there first, nor cared which should be the last to endure. They were both pessimists.

For this melancholy habitation Basil Ashworth of the 5th Bahadurs paid a resident of the Sadr Bazaar fifty rupees a month. The furniture of its interior, of which even Balzac would have found little to say, came from the regimental bazaar and cost the lieutenant ten rupees a month. It was such a house as one might conveniently

rest at for a night, or perhaps two nights; but no one would have called it a home. The prospect of living in it, living within these white-washed walls, living with this wickerwork furniture, *for years,* filled poor Laura with that despairing nostalgia of which only the Englishwoman in India can tell the acrid bitterness.

And then there was the matter of servants. In this cheerless house, where she was destined to spend so many hours of the day absolutely alone and entirely unoccupied, with all the windows shuttered and all the doors hermetically sealed to keep out the furnace air, she was surrounded by men whose black faces displeased her, whose silent movements rather frightened her, and of whose language she could not understand a word. There was the Bearer, valet and housemaid, who cost fifteen rupees a month; the Khidmatgar, table servant, who cost ten rupees a month and was always asking for twelve; the Bawarchi, who could make a curry, and a hash of everything else, costing twelve rupees; the Mehter, or sweeper and *valet-de-cabinet,* costing six rupees; the Bhisti, man of heaven, with the water-bag, costing five rupees; the Masalchi, which means torch-bearer, and signifies scullion or washer-up, costing six rupees; the Chaukidar, or watchman, costing five rupees; the Sais, for Basil's charger, costing seven rupees; and a grass-cutter to fetch dūb for the horse, and two coolies to pull the punkahs in the bungalow, each costing their master five rupees a month.

All these servants, creeping about like cats, and flashing furtive glances out of sulky eyes at Laura, were for some considerable time almost a terror to her nerves. Many a time she sighed for an irascible English cook and a pert English housemaid — two women who would have done all the work of that little house, and done it properly, in half the time, nay, a quarter of the time,

wasted by these barefoot, sinuous, and sly-peeping Indians. But Mrs. Toynbee helped her, other ladies of the regiment came to encourage her, and Basil in his few spare moments taught her the two or three indispensable words for a lady's colloquy with Bawarchi and Khidmatgar. And presently Laura was more or less mistress in her own house.

This was the manner of their life. At 5.30 Basil got out of bed, dressed in uniform, and went off to parade at 6.30, mounting the guard at 7.30, inspecting the squads of recruits in various kits and various stages of inefficiency, visiting the gymnasium, and attending at the orderly-room from eight o'clock to somewhere in the neighbourhood of nine. At this hour he returned, very hot and tired, but always kind and cheerful, for breakfast. After breakfast, while he was at office, Laura interviewed the Bawarchi, took his accounts and ordered the meals for the day; then rested in a house as dark as a tomb till Basil's return at one o'clock for tiffin. After tiffin, taking off her dress, she lay on her bed, while Basil either attended at office or slept in a chair till five o'clock parade. Then with the delicious coolness of the evening, Laura would dress in her fine clothes and be driven by the sais to the club, where the ladies of the cantonments played tennis, badminton, and bridge, or sat in lounge chairs on the chabutra talking of servants, expenses, and scandals, while the coolies pulled the punkah to and fro with a creaking monotony. The husbands of these ladies would be playing billiards or resting in the reading-room, or smoking and talking in the bar. At 7.45 or 8, Basil would come for Laura and drive her home behind his bony charger, in the little bamboo-cart, which he had bought second-hand for thirty rupees. At half-past eight they dined as well as the indifferent Bawarchi would let them; and at ten

o'clock, thoroughly exhausted and perfectly bored, they yawned themselves to bed.

We must make allowance for the climate, for the fact that she came out at the wrong time of the year, for the fact that Garampur is one of the hottest stations in the Punjàb, and for the fact that she was a rich-blooded creature, craving action and exercise; these things must be taken into consideration while we watch the modifications in Laura's character, and see how, in spite of all her struggles and longings to be her best, she became fretful, peevish, unhappy, and afraid of the future. However considerable the changes in her character, they did not come till a battle had been waged against them. And, remember, for a warm-blooded European new to the country it is not easy to wage any battle at all in the first blast of the hot weather.

One afternoon Laura was lying on her string bed in a white muslin peignoir tied with pink ribbons, her white-stockinged feet crossed over each other, the green grass slippers which she wore about the bedroom lying on the thin mat beside the bed. The dress which she had cast off hung carelessly over a chair. The windows were shuttered to keep out the heat. The thick Khus-Khus tatties hanging in the doorway had just been sprinkled with water by the Bhisti and gave off a pungent scent, like cedar wood, pot-pourri, and summer dust. A couple of lizards clung motionless on the white-washed wall. The metallic *ping* of a dreary mosquito every now and then sounded its little shrill trumpet of threat in Laura's ears. From the cantonments came the occasional call of a bugle and the monotonous drumming of a tom-tom.

It was too dark to read, too stifling to lower the mosquito-curtains, too irritating for sleep. She lay with her hands behind her head, her eyes open, and her

brain active. She thought of a hundred things, clearly, quietly, but without energy. She wondered whether life would be more endurable after the rains. She wished she had learned to play tennis and badminton before she came out. She thought of this woman's bilious complexion, that woman's vulgar accent, another woman's dress, a fourth woman's loud voice, a fifth woman's audacity. Then there was the matter of stores; how expensive everything was, how impossible to keep down the bills unless they lived entirely on the produce of the country. Basil's pay, even as adjutant, did not carry very far. Her mother had been right; money is required to render existence tolerable. The bald head of Frederick Slee swam like a great balloon into the haze of her meditations, which was spotted with figures of rupees and shillings and farthings. What would he think of this life! She felt the sweet breezes of England, and saw the spring sun shining on the walls, the awnings, and the cobbles of Cambridge. She saw the fruiterer's shop, the grocer's, the tobacconist's, the bookseller's. Crowds of undergraduates went by, Agamemnon in their midst, with Frederick Slee and Rose and Olive's two children following behind. She saw the ancient lane where Basil had proposed to her. She remembered how fast her heart had beaten. It made her smile to think how excited she had been. What a nice boy he was; how kind, how patient, how sympathetic. But, if he would only talk about things that interested her. It was nothing but gossip at the club, gossip and the regiment at meals, and yawns and tiredness after dinner. He had seemed the very prince of men when she was threatened by Frederick Slee. But now, he seemed small, undeveloped, self-satisfied, dull; kind and gentle but not the shadow of a tall rock in a thirsty

land. Captain Maitland was an interesting man — in a way. Captain White was more or less an intelligent person. Captain Reden was amusing. Mrs. Toynbee had really no ideas beyond —

She heard a visitor on the verandah calling "Koi hai?" for the servant. She looked at her watch, saw that it was nearly five, and got up from the bed. While she was tidying her hair, the Bearer announced that the Padre Sahib had called. Laura said, "I will come in a minute. Prepare tea."

Candy Sahib was the cantonment chaplain, a fat clean-shaven young man, prematurely bald, and unpunctual in everything else. No one took him seriously. He played a moderate game of bridge, was immoderate in the accounts of his shooting expeditions, drank more pegs than was good for his liver, sang a more or less vulgar comic song, made himself the life and soul of regimental theatricals, and perhaps more perfectly misrepresented the religion of Jesus than any other European or Indian in the station.

He greeted Laura with a jovial cheerfulness, his yellow face crinkling up into far-spreading wrinkles, his long loose lips, which were a faded mauve, waggling about like two eels, his little round eyes disappearing into bags of perspiring puffiness. It was Laura's first private experience of this Man of God.

"Ha, splendid!" he exclaimed, smiling, smacking his lips, and rubbing his hands. The chair creaked as he sat down, a mass of fat, and stretched his little legs. "I've come to take you to the club," he went on; "and to pay you a pastoral visit at the same time. I hope you will forgive me for regarding you as one of my lambs! Ha, ha! One of my pet lambs! Well, now, Mrs. Ashworth, how do you like Garampur?— and how

does this bungalow suit you?—and, above all things, what do you think of *us?* Yes, that's the point! What do you think of us?"

"I'm getting used to things, I think," said Laura, watching him rather curiously.

The punkah went to and fro with a lazy sweep, creaking on its ceiling-hooks.

He laughed and rubbed a handkerchief over his wet face. "It's not a bad station. We're rather a cheerful crowd. At least, I think so. At any rate, there are worse. I've been in some places — God-forsaken, *awful!* — where murder might have been excused, and justification found for suicide. Upon my word! Oh, yes, compared with other stations, Garampur is Paris!"

"It will be better after the rains, no doubt."

"Oh, yes; you'll get on splendidly. But, by the way, we mustn't let the Indian climate spoil your English complexion! Ah, it's a joy to look at you, Mrs. Ashworth. I said to Major Romford only yesterday, 'By Jove, Ashworth has brought us a real rose out of the Garden of England.' Stunning! You've no idea what it means to us out here to see a face like yours — all fresh and soft and beautiful! India's hard on women, Mrs. Ashworth. Oh! terribly, *terribly* hard. You've noticed how yellow they are — and brittle like a biscuit. Thin as herrings, most of them, poor dears, and dry as the dust. I feel for 'em. People accuse our women out here of being this and that and the other; but — well, I for one don't judge them. What a life! And then there's the climate. Let him that is without sin among you —. But, I say, what do you think of Mrs. Braggel?"

He raised his eyebrows, almost winked, and laughed — rubbing his fat hands in his handkerchief, the elbows resting on his knees, his head bent forward.

"Mrs. Braggel?" said Laura. "I don't think I—"

"Oh, you must! Wife of Captain Braggel, Braggel of the British Regiment. Tall, powerful woman; lot of red-brown hair, and a complexion and eyebrows that come off at night."

"Yes, I think I—"

"Oh, I knew you must! Everybody knows Tootsie Braggel. Poor Tootsie! Ah, me; we all laugh at her, and a good many look down their noses when she enters a room, and no doubt she isn't a Hallelujah Lass; but—." He paused, pursed his lips, beat with his fat fingers upon the back of his other hand, and said slowly—"Believe me, Mrs. Ashworth, in these cases there is always a But."

Tea was brought in.

"Oh, not for me. Please!" cried the chaplain. "I never drink tea except in the morning. I hope you haven't ordered it for me. Everyone knows I never take tea! But if you'd allow me to swear at your punkah-wallah, it would relieve my feelings!"

At this moment a cart drove up to the door, and Mrs. Toynbee entered the bungalow, dressed for the club. The padre rose awkwardly from his chair, and while she greeted Laura, smiled and beamed upon the two ladies, with his handkerchief clasped in his hands, his lips mumbling approval of the situation.

"You find me at work as usual!" he exclaimed, taking Mrs. Toynbee's hand.

"We say that he is more of a crook than a shepherd," explained that lady to Laura.

"Two of them made that remark last night," said the padre, with a genial smile which ended in a chuckle. "Balgrove and I played the bridge of our lives. In the last game, the others were twenty and we were twenty-eight. My partner left it to me. I called Spades, and

I hadn't got a single spade in my hand, truly! Nothing but a few small diamonds, a line of little hearts, and six small clubs. Not a single spade. The others, you see, would have doubled a red suit, and we should have lost the game. Instead, we got the odd, won the rubber, and went comfortably home with thirty rupees apiece!"

He rolled his chair, and mopped his forehead with the handkerchief which was never out of his hands.

"You don't care for bridge?" Mrs. Toynbee inquired of Laura.

Laura smiled and shook her head, passing her guest a cup of tea. "No; I have never played."

"Oh, we must teach you!" cried the chaplain. "Bridge is the one thing that makes life endurable in India. It helps us to forget mosquitoes and liver. It helps us to be content with our lot. And for you especially, Mrs. Ashworth, it would come as a boon and a blessing. It would prevent you from fretting and wishing you hadn't married a man in the Indian Army. It's an occupation."

"Fiddlesticks!" cried Mrs. Toynbee. "You don't fret at all, do you, my dear?" she inquired of Laura. "You're standing the heat splendidly."

"Of course she is!" exclaimed the chaplain. "But, all the same, every woman is better for occupation, and particularly in India. Satan finds some mischief still—! Seriously, I regard bridge as a means of grace. Look at the women who play regularly. They're all good. They never think of anything else. Whereas, a woman with no occupation, especially a pretty woman, is apt to drift from the diversion of Platonism into the obsession of Eros. Ha, ha! It's so easy. Remember the climate."

Mrs. Toynbee looked at him and laughed. "If you would only preach like that!" she exclaimed.

"At any rate," he said, laughing, "my sermons never yet made anybody worse than they were before — although no one has ever said to me, like the old woman to her rector, 'I do love to hear you preach; your language is such wonderful fluid!' You know, Mrs. Ashworth, in India a sermon's greatest virtue is brevity. Ten minutes, with a leaning to mercy's side. Eloquence is for northern latitudes. In the East we go to sleep without the aid of rhetoric."

"Have you offered him a peg?" asked Mrs. Toynbee.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" exclaimed Laura, and called for the servant.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Toynbee said to Laura as she drove her to the club: "Our padre is a very good sort, but he isn't quite one's idea of an apostle."

"No," said Laura; "he's a little shocking, isn't he?"

"Poor fellow, he ought never to have taken orders. Youthful enthusiasm, I suppose; just like some marriages which end in misery. It's a pity that one has to choose a profession and a husband when one's judgment is so easily bewitched. But poor Candy Sahib ought to be more careful. Unfortunately he isn't a gentleman. However, he gets on fairly well."

"Do men like him?"

"No, they don't like him; but they suffer him. Only once, I think, has he ever been pulled up. That was by Robert Grant. You haven't met him. A wonderful man, my dear; one of the great men of India; a Civil Engineer, mighty at canals and irrigation, a pretty fair likeness to a god in face and mind. They've made him consulting engineer to one of the provincial governments, and so we've lost him — such a loss! Well, one day at the club, our poor little padre was holding forth in genial fashion, saying so-and-so was a ripper, so-and-so was a stunner, and so-and-so was a fizzer, praising any-

body who seemed to him a good sort, when Robert Grant, who had entered the room a minute before, and who was known to hate the padre, said quietly, 'I'll tell you another man who must have been a ripping good chap, a real sport, top-notch, a fizzer — that's St. Peter.' They say that the padre joined in the laugh, but his face was green and he kept quiet for the rest of the evening."

"Do women like him?" asked Laura.

"Oh, everybody just laughs at him. He's a character, and there the matter ends. Robert Grant dubbed him the *Rector Abdominis*, which is the name of one of the muscles. Like a great many other people he is waiting for his pension; his life is that — waiting to go home on a pension."

As they entered the club Mrs. Braggel issued from the cardroom smoking a cigarette, with a laughing and rather silly-faced youth at her heels.

"We call her the Auctioneer," whispered Mrs. Toynbee.

"Is that Mrs. Braggel?"

"Yes."

"Why do you call her the Auctioneer?"

"The highest bidder, my dear!"

They went and sat together on the chabutra after Mrs. Toynbee had changed a book in the library.

"Well, now, tell me," said Mrs. Toynbee; "you are quite settling down and enjoying yourself?"

"Well, I am settling down!" laughed Laura.

"You know, there is some truth in what the padre said."

"About what?"

"Occupation. A woman in India needn't be bad to drift into dangerous adventures. It begins so simply. It often ends so tragically even for the best women. I

knew a woman whose husband was so busy that he couldn't ride with her, and who asked his greatest friend to take her out in the morning. These two rode together for several months. He was interesting, she was provocative. Then one morning the man couldn't help himself, and began to say things. All my friend did was to turn round, hold up a finger, and say, 'Don't spoil it all, please, Mr. So-and-so!' They remained friends, and he rode with her as usual for many weeks. They were both wonderfully happy, but both conscious of a barrier. Then he went to see her off from the station, to say good-bye to her. Just before the train started she turned, gave him her hand, and her eyes filled with tears. They looked at each other, and parted without a word. She could not help letting him know the truth when she knew it was safe."

Laura felt the pathos of this story.

"Bridge, of course, is not a very ennobling occupation," continued Mrs. Toynbee, "but at least it does help to pass the time away. Unless a woman has children, or is interested in religious work, it is well for her to have a hobby. All the trouble comes from languor and tedium."

"Unless a woman loves her husband," said Laura.

"Well, yes; but love has its periods and stages, like everything else in life. Where men are so hard-worked as they are in India, and where the work is sometimes of a rather narrowing and groovy nature, the wife is apt to find her first passion changing into affection, and from affection moving slowly into just friendliness or comradeship — lacking interest, curiosity, surprise. Of course, there are plenty of noble women who never change, and who would rather die than entertain one disloyal thought; but it is a mistake, I am sure, to suppose that only bad women drift into dangerous friend-

ships. I have known some sweet women who have made a mistake."

"But with good husbands?"

"It depends what you mean by good. A man may love his wife and be perfectly straight; but his work may take him away from her, he may only be able to give her the fag-end and yawns of his day; and sometimes, in spite of his virtue, he may cease to interest her. That is the fatal moment. After all, every woman is curious, and every woman likes flattery and attention. It is much safer to have occupation, or a hobby. You never know when a man is going to cross your path who will provoke your curiosity and awaken in you a new interest in life. If you are an idle person, with long hours in which to do nothing but lie down and think, such an encounter will be dangerous. I have often noticed that the hard women, thorough worldlings, who think only of dress and cards, are less liable to these temptations than the sweeter and gentler type."

"It's rather amusing," said Laura, with a smile, "to hear the parson prescribing bridge as a means of grace. I wonder what the man you were speaking of, the Civil Engineer, would have thought of that!"

"Robert Grant? Oh, I don't know."

"Who is this coming towards us?"

"No one I know."

"He's smiling."

"Perhaps it's —"

Laura sprang to her feet. "King!" she cried, with excitement, so that many people turned to look at her. "Oh, King! I'm so glad to see you."

"It's good to see you."

"I never expected you!" she cried, looking at him with delight, and still holding his hand.

"No, it's only by chance I got here."

She introduced him to Mrs. Toynbee.

"Well, Laura," he said presently, "how do you like India?"

"I'm getting used to it," she answered; "and now that you've come it's delightful!"

He looked about him. "You've got a jolly fine station," he said. "By George, it's like London compared with the place where I curse the gods from five o'clock in the morning to ten o'clock at night."

Mrs. Toynbee regarded him, and asked, "Where are you stationed, Mr. Thornton?"

"Oh, away in the wilds. I'm a District Inspector of Police. Gardaabad is my head-quarters. You've never heard of it, I expect! I'm the only white man for thirty miles around. It's a kind of electrical shock to me when I see a white woman. By George, Laura, you look thundering fit. India hasn't begun to burn you up yet."

When Mrs. Toynbee left them, King spoke at large of his life. He hated India. He hated the peoples of India. He hated his work of policeman. He said he would give one of his eyes to get out of it. "And look at the pay," he said; "it's what they give a clerk at home. I tell you, it's impossible to live on it. I should be far better off in London!"

Laura noticed how peevish, rebellious, and frustrated was the expression of his frowning eyes. He looked many years older. The sun had not only thinned him and baked him; it had darkened his hair and lined his face. There was a restiveness in his manner. The alertness of his carriage and movements was nervous rather than physical. He spoke between his teeth, grinding them, the lips expressing bitterness. He wore a little moustache, which he twisted up in waxed ends. He was over-smartly dressed.

He drove home with Laura, and the tum-tum went

back to fetch Ashworth. The two men met for the first time at dinner.

Laura soon detected that neither was at ease with the other. Basil, keen about his work, and so placid in his disposition that India appeared to him as good a country as any other, a man who always smiled amiably when people complained about anything at all — the heat, the cooking, or the newest regulations — found himself seated at the table with a fiery and violent young man, who never said one single word that was not in the nature of a grumble, and who steadily and almost as if to give offence abused India with an intemperance of language that became swiftly exasperating.

King, for his part, was annoyed to find that his brother-in-law took no interest in racing; he came to the swift conclusion that Basil was a cub. Because of Ashworth's quiet demeanour and boyish-pleasant eyes, the irascible King, who was smarting just then from a disastrous race meeting, set himself to be more violent and more exasperating. The climate of India, as every mess can testify, almost impels certain temperaments to seek argument and controversy up to the very point of fury.

"You don't seem to like the country!" said Basil, as the coffee came in.

"Like it!" exclaimed King. "*Like* it! Good God, who can possibly do that? Beg pardon, Laura; but the idea that anybody could possibly like such an infernal country —"

"Come!" said Basil, "plenty of people like it!"

"Do they!"

"Plenty."

"Do you like it, Laura?"

"Well, I've only just come out."

"It's all very well for you," said King, taking a cigarette and looking at Basil; "you're keen on soldier-

ing; you think there's nothing else to do in life; India would suit you as well as any other place. But how about the man who isn't in love with uniforms and drills and marches and bands — the man who wants a bigger life and more interesting people to mix with? How about the woman who has got nothing to do all day but lie down with the doors and windows shut, in a kind of gloom like a sepulchre, waiting till it's time to go to the club for a couple of hours? What sort of life is that? Two hours at a club — her day, her life! Always meeting the same people. Always the same kind of chatter. Always the same grumbles and complaints. You don't think about other people."

He lit his cigarette and leaned back in his chair with a weary and yet angry dissatisfaction clouding his hard young face. Laura looked at him, remembered how dear he had been to her, and felt for him an infinite sorrow.

"A man," said Basil, "has got to do his duty. That's all it comes to. And the more cheerfully he does it, the less unpleasant he is likely to be to other people."

Laura flushed. She felt afraid of a scene. She saw King's eyes flash with antagonism, and looking at her husband saw that he was regarding the other with the rather impatient reproval of a superior.

"Is that meant for me?" asked King, between his teeth.

"So far as it is an answer to your argument."

"Now, you mustn't quarrel!" said Laura, trying to laugh.

"I think a man can do his duty," King went on in his angry way, never taking his eyes from Basil's face, "and yet be able to speak the truth about the country in which he does it. And I'll tell you another thing; I think a man who does his duty, hating it all the time, and not asking a woman to share the hell of his existence, is

just as good a man, *just as good,* as the man who likes his duty and asks a woman to share his life in a country acknowledged to be on all hands a hell for English women. That isn't meant for you, but only as an answer to your argument!"

He laughed, pleased with himself, and turned to Laura.

Ashworth smiled, and also looked at Laura.

"Don't you think," Ashworth asked quietly, lowering his eyes and watching the smoke drift away from the end of his cigarette, "that some women can enjoy life in India, and do enjoy it? I really think people are giving up the somewhat extravagant idea,—you'll forgive me for calling it extravagant,—that India is necessarily a bad country for women?"

"You may call it extravagant, or anything else you like!" laughed King. "I'll agree with you, too, that it's the best country in the world for *a certain type* of woman; yes, and for *any* type of woman—if her husband is a top-boss. But you don't mean to tell me that India isn't a hell for a woman with a temperament whose husband earns about three or four hundred rupees a month! Look how she has to live. The very bathroom, first thing in the morning, with its beastly zinc tub, its sloppy floor, and its pitchers of dirty water—isn't that enough to disgust any decent woman for the rest of the day? And then she must dress in a room like an oven, do her hair in the dark, come down to a breakfast that you wouldn't give a dog in England—butter in a tin, tasting of cart-grease; bread that's sour and bitter and spongy; and curry that's been handled by a dirty Indian Bawarchi—"

"Oh, come, come, come!" laughed Basil, getting up from the table. He looked at Laura. "Shall we go and sit on the verandah?"

"But, the mosquitoes, Basil!"

"Ha!" cried King; "there's always a fly in the ointment!"

He spent the night with them, but did not sit up with Ashworth after Laura had retired. The two young men did not shake hands at parting, merely nodding their good nights to each other.

"I am afraid you don't like my little brother," Laura said to Ashworth when he came to bed.

"What shall I say?" He looked at Laura and smiled. "He is the brother of the prettiest woman in India; therefore he is privileged. But for that relationship I shouldn't like him."

He came to her bed, sat on the edge of it, and, beginning to unfasten his tie, held forth on King's views of India. Laura, lying back on the pillows, a single sheet over her body, the mosquito curtains not yet lowered that she might get the last of the air, watched her husband's eager face and noticed a certain impatience in his voice and manner.

"India is a very good country indeed; for men and for women too," he said, folding up his tie. "It's all nonsense to speak about modern India as if it were a desert or a wilderness. You never hear soldiers or I.C.S men speak in that fashion. Your brother ought to have known when he went into the Police that his work would take him into lonely places. And besides, there's many a man in the Police who forgets in the interest of his work, jolly interesting work it is too, the little bothers and inconveniences of the country. It's simply a matter of being interested in one's work and doing one's duty thoroughly."

He began to unfasten his collar-stud, and Laura, watching him, with his arms akimbo, his brown hands struggling in front of the white linen, his face slightly contorted by the effort, became conscious of loyalty to her brother,

the brother who had been so inexpressibly dear to her, and who had suffered so greatly at his father's hands. Also, she was conscious — perhaps it was the climate or contagion from King's irritation — of a certain umbrage at the impatient tone in Basil's voice.

She said quietly, "Perhaps he didn't realise when he entered the Police that he would be sent right away from things. There was no one to tell him. I dare say he came out to India as enthusiastically as Mr. Candy entered the Church."

Ashworth paused, the front of his shirt open, and looked at Laura. "I hope *you* don't find it dull," he said. "Of course, it takes a little time to get acclimatised, and we came out at the worst time of the year; but a few weeks after the rains you'll find that the place is delightful — there'll be picnics, and junketings, and tamashas. You like the people, too; don't you?"

"I like some of them very well."

"Mrs. Toynbee is a ripper. There's a woman to contradict everything your brother said! Look how she goes about making other people happy. One never hears her complain! And isn't her husband busy from early morning till late at night? Why, she sees precious little more of him than you see of me. Oh, it's really nonsense to shout down the country as your brother does. There are lots of good and happy women in India — lots of them."

He began to undo his braces, still sitting on the bed, and stifling a yawn.

"I'm sorry King has annoyed you," said Laura. "He's very young, and I'm afraid he's a little hot-tempered; but he is really a nice boy."

Basil smiled. "My dearest Laura," he said, looking at her with affection, "the little brother hasn't annoyed me in the least." He leaned towards her. "I'm far too

much in love with the sister." He put his arms round her. "It was only because I didn't want him to make you unhappy and dissatisfied that I had a fling at argument. You aren't unhappy, are you? We've got each other. Life at least is peaceful and secure. It would be ever so much harder to make two ends meet in England." He laid his cheek against hers, and kissed her hair above the warm ear that touched his chin. "If you get bored you must tell me, and I'll try and arrange something."

She kissed him. "I'm perfectly happy," she said. "I shall soon get used to the climate, and Mrs. Toynbee is certainly a dear. You mustn't worry about me. If I look bored, it's only the heat."

"I assure you," he said, smothering a yawn, "you'll get to love the place after the rains."

"You're tired," she said, kissing him and pressing him gently away from her. "Go to bed and get a good night's rest."

He lowered her mosquito curtains, tucked them in, and crossed the room to his own bed. In another few minutes the oil-lamp was turned out.

Laura was bothering her brains to hit upon some plan whereby she might get to be really satisfied and happy in Garampur, when the heavy and regular breathing of her husband told that he was far away from her in the world of dreams.

She heard the Chaukidar outside in the compound clearing his throat and spitting in the dust.

CHAPTER III

CAPTAIN REDEN belonged to the now numerous family of Gigglers — those people who laugh when they shake hands with you, laugh when they ask for an extra piece of sugar in their tea, laugh, in fact, from morning to night about nothing at all, and giggle themselves into a drawing-room reputation for cheerfulness. People said enthusiastically of Captain Reden, "He's so easily amused; he's never in a bad temper; no one could help liking him." He was a fair soldier, a moderately good sportsman, and a brave man; but he was a Giggler. Unable to comprehend the real beauty and impressive solemnity of the Universe, he was anti-pathetic to books, conversation, and people of a serious character. He felt that life should be taken as one of its amusements. At an awkward or a dull dinner-party no one could have been more useful than Captain Reden; but for a long and unmitigated companionship no one could have been more tiresome.

He was one of the men at Garampur who "fancied" Laura. He considered her to be a deuce of a fine woman. He found her not only easy to amuse, but easily amusing. She made him think about her when he was alone. It was always to her side that he first went on entering the club. On several occasions he called at the little white bungalow with the solitary tree in its compound. Nothing was noble and sacred to Captain Reden, and therefore no woman had ever profoundly moved him; but Laura perhaps had made a greater impression on the

worst qualities of his nature than any other woman he had met.

The rains came in mid July and lasted till nearly the end of October. For three months the dazzle and burning heat of the sun disappeared, but the atmosphere was so oppressive that poor Laura, not yet acclimatised, sometimes felt her nerves strained to a tension wellnigh intolerable. And then after the rains came a period when the whole world seemed converted into a Turkish bath — a period of steam and suffocation, a period when everything was moist and clammy to the touch, a period when the enervation of the will and the depression of the mind were alike an angry and accusing mutiny against God.

During this trying period Basil and Laura occasionally had what we call "tiffs" — not serious quarrels, not dangerous misunderstandings, but little conflicts on trivial themes almost sought and deliberately created as diversions from oppressive monotony. Laura had set herself to follow the padre's counsel, but she could never remember what cards were out, could never master the more recondite rules of the game, and so remained not only a bad bridge player, but an unpopular figure in the card-room. It was therefore a dull existence for her at Garampur, and the library was not of any particular service to her somewhat superior mind — a mind which at least knew, instinctively, the difference between a bad style and a good style of writing, and which by nature was inclined only towards realism. She did little reading. The needlework which she undertook for a charity gave her no pleasure. So rebellious was her warm blood to the frightful climate that even Mrs. Toynbee became a bore. The other women were rather stupid and feeble. There was scarcely a man in the place who could talk about the subjects which interested her mind. They were

pleasant, good-looking, and fine creatures, very many of them; but there appeared to Laura to be none who outside his profession was a thinker or a man of sensitive temperament.

Laura also had family worries. King had written to her in pecuniary difficulties, asking her to get some money for him out of Uncle David at Bath. Uncle David had sent five pounds, but had also remarked that so many married people with large families surrounded him on every side, whose income was very considerably less than King's, that he really could not bring his conscience to send any more money out to India. Then there was Rose. Poor Rose! One of the other sisters had written to tell Laura that this unhappy sister had taken to a bad life, and was living very shamefully in Berlin. Two other sisters had gone out to earn their own living — one as a governess, and one as a companion. The letter had concluded: "The house gets duller and more miserable every day, and things are not improved by father's devotion to whisky. I found mother crying the other day in her room, and she said to me, 'It's all unintelligible; it seems as if we were under a curse; I wish I had faith enough to pray, and strength enough to begin again; but it's no use now — it's all unintelligible.' You are very lucky to be out of the home. But I can't tell you how we all miss you. It was you who helped us to be good — the best of eldest sisters."

All unintelligible! Yes, Laura agreed — all unintelligible. Life was nothing but progress in disillusion. In the human heart existed infinite capacities for joy, infinite longings and desires, infinite powers of dreaming dreams; but the facts of life were too much for this foolish human heart and conquered it and broke it and mocked at its ultimate pessimism and bitterness.

She went back to the days of her first meeting with

Basil. Why had the glory and the exaltation departed? He had seemed, if not a god, at least a Romeo. And ever since those days, how kind and considerate he had been. She loved him still, but alas without enthusiasm. Why not with the old enthusiasm? It seemed to her, looking back, that she had never loved him with the whole of her nature, only with the excitable part. She wished she could love him steadily and calmly. But whether it was the climate, or whether it was the common disillusion of mere infatuation, she felt herself critically disposed towards her husband. Heaven knows she fought against this tendency. Heaven knows she struggled to be bright and sweet and grateful. But there were hours when she thought she had made a mistake, when she hated India, when she wished that Basil had intellect as well as politeness and affection.

She considered that he was stupid to take his dull profession so seriously, to be so completely obsessed by a military discipline. Life was surely intended for something greater. At the same time she saw how futile it was to kick against the pricks as King attempted to do. No; Basil's disposition was the better, and she must be careful to remember how passionately she had once loved him. Soon she would get used to the climate. Soon she would have energy to undertake some work in the station. Then it would be easy. Then she and Basil would be quite happy again. She must just go on fighting her bad qualities and waiting for her blood to be thinned by the Indian sun.

In upon this mood of hers, during the rains, broke the personality of Captain Reden.

He was among the first to adopt the rat-catcher style of toilet and adornment. Basil was rather like a pretty doll in face, and held himself with square shoulders, the chest well advanced, the neck rigid, the whole body con-

stantly on parade, the whole mind constantly at attention. And in dress, he was particular, smart, fanciful — the old-fashioned band-box variety of British officer. On the other hand, Reden walked with a slouch, held himself slackly, wore the oldest of clothes, and did his hair anyhow — following the latest fashion of smartness among cavalry officers, whose pose is to be taken for poachers or rat-catchers — anything but soldiers.

His countenance was charming enough — a healthy burned skin, dark eyes thickly lashed, curling hair, a straight nose, regular teeth, and lips always at a smile. It was in his eyes that the charm lay — they were calm, watchful, intimate, and a trifle ironical. He had the habit of looking one long and steadily in the face, with an amused interest and a rallying sincerity. It was as if he knew the truth of one's worst nature and regarded the struggling best as hypocrisy. Then his voice was pleasant — a generous, easy-going, and indulgent voice. He was popular with men. A good many women ran after him.

Laura did not care for him at first, thinking him silly, and taking offence at his perpetual flippancy. As she became conscious of his settled interest in her, and gradually perceived the significance of his repeated visits at the bungalow, she became intellectually curious about him. He acted as a distraction.

"I wonder what he really thinks about life," she would say to herself; and then at their next meeting she would try to lead him into interesting conversation; but Captain Reden either giggled away these topics or bent them into dangerous shape, so that Laura in her turn had to giggle them aside. Reden giggled to protect his ignorance. Laura giggled to protect her virtue.

He came to the bungalow one day, just when the delicious cold weather was beginning to be like a spring to

English blood, and made a suggestion that delighted the reviving Laura.

"Let us make a party and go to Agra," he said. "You ought to see the Taj. Then there's the Pearl Mosque. And best of all there's the Cecil Hotel, where one can get Christian food and catch glimpses of civilisation. We might spend two or three days there. Mrs. Romford and her husband would come, you and I, don't you know, and our dear little Basil as well, if he can tear himself away from orderly room. We'd have the time of our lives. Nothing of a journey. Fun all the way. And the Taj by moonlight."

When Laura told Basil of this suggestion, he replied, without his usual kindness, "Romford spoke about it to me this afternoon. I can't possibly go myself. But there's no reason why you shouldn't go, if you care about it."

She was displeased by the off-hand manner in which he spoke. She did not realise that he was beginning to fear jealousy and was making a manful fight to conceal it.

"I should like it very much," she answered. "The only question is, can we afford it?"

"Oh, don't bother about that."

"Isn't it possible for you to come?"

"No."

The day before the setting out of this expedition, both Basil and Laura were conscious of strain in their relations. He did not go down to office after breakfast, but changed into flannels, and sat on the verandah in a long chair, smoking a cheroot and reading a book. Laura spent part of the time with her wardrobe and trunks.

At tiffin, Basil brought his book to the table.

Early in the afternoon Reden arrived at the house with a programme of final arrangements for Laura. Basil sat with them, but scarcely joined in the conversation.

He gave no sign of jealousy, and smiled at Reden's final jests when the Giggler took his departure.

Soon afterwards a Mrs. Saunderson came to call, a vulgar, foolish person. "What a pity you can't go too," she said to Ashworth. "But you're one of those delightful husbands who let their wives every now and then kick up their heels without being either jealous or wicked themselves. Mrs. Ashworth won't be anxious about *you*, I'm sure."

Laura went to the club and played tennis for a couple of hours. Basil drove her a roundabout way home in the little thirty-rupee tum-tum. They hardly spoke a word to each other.

After dinner they sat together on the verandah, their long chairs separated from each other only by a small table with the coffee things. They both faced in the same direction, looking towards the solitary tree which appeared almost beautiful in the moonlight. The croaking of frogs was regular and vibrating. Far away sounded the nasal singing of natives in the bazaar, wobbling up to a snarling crescendo with the quick thudding of several tom-toms and the faint tin-like twangling of a zither for feverish accompaniment.

"I've arranged with Romford about your expenses," said Basil, throwing his cigarette into the compound. "He'll pay everything, and I'll settle with him when he returns."

"Thanks," said Laura. "I shall have to take some money with me, I suppose."

"Yes, I've got that ready for you."

"I hope you'll be comfortable while I'm away. I've told the Bawarchi everything I can think of."

"Oh, yes; I shall be all right."

"It's not for long."

"No."

He began to feel in his pockets. Then he called "Koi hai!" loudly, vexatiously. The Khidmatgar made his appearance. "Cheroots," said Ashworth. As the white figure moved noiselessly away, he called out, "And bring matches." Laura noticed an unusual abruptness in these orders.

They were silent for a long time after the servant had come and gone.

He had smoked one of the cheroots half down, when he said to her, after clearing his voice and shifting rather uneasily in his chair, "I suppose it is not necessary, but I should like to put you on your guard about — well, about this trip."

"Yes?"

Laura could not tell that he had been thinking over what he was about to say, during their long and constrained silence. She felt herself on the defensive.

Basil said slowly and rather unwillingly, "Romford's all right, and his wife is quite a decent sort; but Reden doesn't enjoy the best of reputations."

She felt nettled. "You don't mean to imply," she began rather coldly, and then stopped. "What's come to you lately, Basil?" she asked, turning her head against the back of her chair. "You seem so strange to me. Not a bit like your real self."

He made no answer.

She could see his profile against the dusk of a distant wall. His elbows rested on the arms of the chair, his hands were raised to his mouth, holding the cheroot which burned redly. Something in his silhouette touched her.

"Don't you want me to go on this trip?" she asked, gently.

He smoked for a moment in silence; then, taking the cigar from his lips, he turned slowly and looked

at her. "Yes, I want you to go; you need a change; it will do you good," he replied, a little huskily. He coughed away this huskiness, sat up in his chair, and continued, looking away from her, "But I'm not sure that you realise the risk. I mean, you're strange to the country. Men in India are apt to rush women into friendships that are rather dangerous. A woman has to be on her guard."

Then, foolishly — or, if you like it, honestly, he added like a boy, "I know this myself, from some rather curious experiences of my own."

For the first time it struck her that Basil, this good and dutiful young husband, had had adventures; that there were experiences in his life of which she knew nothing; that he was not pure.

The boy, with a mere bravado intended to impress his wife, had set the brain of an imaginative woman thinking back about him.

Hitherto she had done nothing but think forward. The perspective was not alluring. She perceived that Ashworth was one of those men who reach a maturity of sorts at five-and-twenty, and never afterwards develop. He was good, he was kind, he was considerate; but he had done growing. She anticipated nothing but a respectable dullness with this hard-working husband, who had bewitched and infatuated her once, who had made her honeymoon like a dream, but who had never perhaps profoundly interested her. The prospect of her life was not alluring, but it had never once crossed her mind to rebel against it. She had a clear sense of duty; she was always fighting down little moods of rebellion. Looking forward into this long, this interminable vista of unbroken monotony, had given a sad expression to her eyes. She said to herself, "How grateful I ought to be; how wicked I am to criticise

him!" But she could not help seeing that the whole of her future was now a long straight road of crushing sameness. She looked forward with tired eyes, saying, "I will do my duty."

But now, she thought back. How had he lived in India before she became his wife? How many women had felt his charm as she had felt it in the old lamp-lighted curving lane of Cambridge, and thrilled with his nervous declaration of love? Into how many women's eyes had he looked deeply and tenderly? Into his arms, how many women had he taken, passionately? How many had he kissed?

She felt her blood grow chill, and knew that her lips were scornful. Yet something very like tears were in her eyes.

His voice came to her in the darkness.

"You see, Laura," he said slowly, "when a man and a woman are thrown together a good deal, it's almost natural, at any rate, it's —"

He stopped, and turned quickly towards her.

She was gathering up her book and handkerchief and scent-bottle from the table that divided them. The quick manner in which she was doing this told him with unhappy force that he had offended her. While he stared at her, his heart-beats muffled with apprehension, she rose from her chair, and walked past him into the bungalow without a word. The dragging of her train made him feel afraid.

He sat thinking how he had angered her.

It seemed to him that he had been unworthily jealous, and that he had offended her by hinting at the smallest danger to her chastity. He cursed himself for this jealousy.

And yet, could he ever get used, as other married men got used, to the thought of smiling philanderers

being alone for long hours with his wife? Would he not always feel suspicious of them, and angered against his wife for wishing to be with these men? Did it not hurt him keenly to think that Laura got pleasure from the society of other men? Was he not for ever wishing that her smiles were only for him?

He arraigned himself on a charge of culpable and shameful jealousy. But he reflected in silence with himself, "I cannot help my nature. This pretty girl, who gets so easily bored, and whom I cannot help loving, makes me suffer terribly. It is no use saying I am not jealous. I don't mean to say that I think for one moment that she will ever become a bad woman; but other men please her, she is happy with them, she is glad to be going away from me; Reden will be with her all day, and even if she repulses him, and of course she will do that, it will be with kindness and smiles — not with indignation and contempt, out of loyalty to me. No; it's no use, I hate to think of her like that. It makes my blood like vinegar. I *am* jealous. I wish I had never seen her. I wish I had kept a bachelor. Marriage brings nothing but distress and wretchedness. What a fool I have been! How Reden must be chuckling to think of me. Curse him, how I hate the chap."

It occurred to him that Laura was furiously angry with him. But that was a happy thought! She was pure and innocent.

He was in the wrong, and must make it up with her. Perhaps she was crying in her room. Perhaps she would refuse to go on this trip. That would make him look a fool. Of course she must go. And yet, if only she could get out of it! "I was an ass to speak as if she had given me any cause to doubt her virtue. What a fool I have been! She is almost certainly cry-

ing. I have offended her. I must go and make it up."

As he half rose in the chair, the sound of Laura's voice floated out to him in the night. She was singing in her bedroom, from the windows of which the lamplight streamed upon the verandah.

He knew that she was undressing.

What if she *refused* to go, angrily? That would be awkward. The whole station would hear of it. It would make him look a fool. Evidently she was angry with him. He could tell that, by the jaunty way in which she was singing.

He sat back in his chair. With hands that shook a little he took another cheroot from the box on his knees and began to smoke — guiltily, and afraid to go to bed.

CHAPTER IV

REDEN and Laura were standing under the porch of the Cecil Hotel at Agra. The lights from innumerable windows in the scattered wings of this hotel shone through the tall bushes and spreading trees of the garden, making it like the grounds of an exhibition. A number of gharries crowded together formed another mass of light on their left. Servants, in white linen with dark-coloured belts round the waist, flitted out of the shadows of the gardens into the soft radiance of these lights, and disappeared again into the darkness. From the interior of the hotel came the sound of a woman singing at the piano. Behind them, under the portico, men were lighting cigars and cigarettes, and talking in cheerful, but rather lazy after-dinner voices. At the bottom of the flight of steps on which they were standing, waited two gharries.

Major and Mrs. Romford joined them. "Sorry to have kept you," said the Major, who was red-headed, corpulent, pink-faced, with small genial light-coloured eyes. "Are these our gharries? All right; let's be off. Perfect night; not too much moon for the purpose. How do you feel, Mrs. Ashworth? *The Taj by moonlight!* How romantic! What?" He laughed, and helped his wife into one of the little light-running victorias.

"Captain Reden," said his wife, "you must look after Mrs. Ashworth. I can't trust my husband!"

This silly remark made Laura feel very uncomfortable. She pretended to laugh; but Reden's hand on

her arm, helping her into the gharry, was almost like an insult to her feelings.

It was the first time she had been alone with him on this journey. She had parted from her husband in the morning, after a reconciliation which only served to save their farewells from crisis, and ever since then she had been companioned by Mrs. Romford. Mrs. Romford had driven with her to the hotel, and at the dinner, which she had found exciting and pleasant, she had talked most of the time with Mrs. Romford — chiefly about the other women in the crowded room, their dresses, their coiffures, and their manners.

"I hope you aren't going to be disappointed with the Taj," said Reden. "Some people are, you know. Fellows write such a lot of rot about it; they lead one to expect heaven-knows-what in the way of beauty and mystery and all that, and then the reality disappoints. But, upon my word, I don't think there's anything quite like it in the world."

The other gharry was ahead of them. They were driving over soft roads with deep trees on one side, the faint moonlight bathing everything in a luminous mist.

"I am quite prepared for disenchantment," said Laura.

"One goes through life shedding illusions!" laughed Reden.

"I suppose the interest lies in the way in which one sheds them."

"But I don't think, I really don't, that you will be disenchanted about the Taj," he said, turning to look at her. "The very *raison d'être* of the thing is a kind of titillation to one's feelings. You know, don't you, that it's the monument of a man's love for a woman?"

"Yes. A monument of grief."

"The lady's name was Mumtaz Mahal; her fame,

like so many of the great women of the past, lies in the fact of a man's love. Shah Jahan loved little Mumty. Hence the Taj, and hence this drive through the moonlight. How proud she must be, if she can look down from the stars and see us driving towards her tomb after a good dinner."

"Are you trying to save my illusion, by being irreverent?"

"Yes. That's a good idea! It's a splendid way to approach in a light and flippant mood anything one has longed to see. That's how the old pilgrims used to go to Canterbury. Have you ever read the 'Wife of Bath'?"

"No."

He laughed. "She was a lady with an insatiable appetite for husbands. She went to Canterbury telling the other pilgrims of her adventures. She needed shriving pretty badly!"

She wished he would not speak. The night was so calm and lovely that any voice was a disturbance, any conversation a discord. The indolent flippancies which came from his lips were an irritation. To keep up a chatter with him was vexing. When she reflected that this self-contented man at her side was not conscious of his uncouthness of mind, she felt superior to him.

She wondered if Ashworth had ever driven with a woman to the Taj. How would he have conversed? Not irreverently, not stupidly. He would have probably been sentimental and romantic; if not interesting and delightful, he would at least have been seemly and gentle. It made her angry to think of him driving beside a woman under moonlight and starlight, along this soft and shadowed road, to the tomb of a woman who had been wonderfully loved.

They came into the darkness of many trees, and

pulled up before a vast and towering gateway, reached by a noble flight of stairs. Long-robed figures rose up from the ground and stood against the archway waiting for them to approach. Reden explained to her that here in the wide space of this quadrangle was the serai, the Dharmsala, where pilgrims rested under the shadow of the great entry, they and their cattle, in the beautiful arcades.

She was profoundly impressed by this huge dark mass of stone looming up from the dust to the deep purple of the skies, with the robed and turban'd figures standing against it. Romford and his wife, seeing her with Reden at her side, looking up at the entrance without making any move towards the flight of stairs which they had already mounted, took this as a hint, and passed on into the garden. Laura saw them go under the superb arch, and thought how diminutive and absurd they looked.

"It's so vast," she said to Reden; "I had no idea it was like this."

"No, the pictures make it look like a doll's house, don't they?"

"But I thought it was white marble? And where are the domes?"

"Oh," he laughed, "this is merely the entrance, dear lady! The Taj itself awaits you in the garden beyond. *This* — this is a mere bagatelle! I tell you, men and women loved in those days."

She looked and looked; delighted, impressed, responsive. The grandeur of it was like organ music, exalting the soul.

"Your invitation," he said, pointing up, "is written in black marble over that arch. It's something from the Koràn. *The pure of heart are bidden to enter the Garden of Paradise.* Shall we accept it?"

"Yes," she answered, and walked on, wishing she were quite alone.

"I don't suppose all of us would get in," he laughed, "if we had to expose our hearts for inspection!"

Mounting these steps had the effect of making her feel smaller and smaller. Her ascent seemed only to exalt the gateway, till the arch was like a sky over her head. A Mussulman, carrying a dim lantern, approached them, but Reden, after greeting him in Hindustani, said they wished to go alone.

As they passed under the arch, Laura caught her first sight of the Taj, and stopped, almost holding her breath.

The majestic arch on the further side of this portal made a frame for the picture which greeted her eyes. She saw the softest ivory-coloured marble of which she had ever dreamed, not white, not silver-white marble as the pictures show it, but amber-white, white with a depth and glow of palest gold — she saw this exquisite marble rising up at a far distance from her, immense, solemn, grand, and beautiful with domes, kiosks and minarets burning against the starlit blue of heaven; rising up from the dark clusters of cypresses surrounding the wide stairs of its approach, letting fall a hint of its exquisite reflection in a long and narrow line of water which was like a path of approach from the portal where she stood ravished and enchanted; rising up against the deep sky with a stillness, a hush, and a sense of reverie which was like the very breath of adoration.

"Abandon hate, all ye who enter here!" said Reden. Then he turned to her, "It is ripping, isn't it?"

She laughed softly. "Oh, quite ripping!" she answered, and thought of Basil's remarks about the Arabs at Aden.

They continued their way under the dark arch, and came presently to the flight of stairs descending to the

gardens. The Taj came nearer to them, not with distinctness of outline or glare of colour, but softened in the dim light of the stars and broken by the spires of the cypress trees.

"Aren't you surprised to find it so enormous — a regular cathedral?" asked Reden. Then he laughed. "Look at old Romford! — like a schoolboy walking on that narrow path trying not to fall into the water!"

They walked beside the lilied line of water, in the shadow of the cypresses, mounted the marble platform in the centre of the garden, where the Romfords were waiting for them by the fountain, and stood there, looking at the superb tomb with its four guardian minarets at the corners of the vast platform, on which the Taj rose huge and glorious with the calm of utter and unchallengeable loveliness.

They descended on the further side, continued their way along a garden terrace shaded by spreading trees, mounted the curving stairs with their dwarf-like balustrade at the further end, and came at last, rather breathless, before the Taj itself — on a level with its floor, and with no trees to break the majesty of its design.

Laura was so overwhelmed by the splendour of it that she wandered away from her companions, going first to this position, and then to that, studying the lines of the architecture, feasting her eyes upon the pierced marble and the inlaid precious stones. But Reden came to her, and she joined the others at the towering entrance.

It was quite dark inside, save for a single silver lamp hanging from the centre just above the tombs. Two or three Mussulmans were lying against the walls, and one of them rose at their entrance, salaamed before them, and fetched a light to show them the wonderful inlay

on the walls and exquisite tracery of the marble screens surrounding the tombs. They spoke in low voices.

"The bodies are really down below," whispered Reden; "I'll get him to take us there. These are only the cenotaphs — sort of show-tombs for tourists!"

The Mussulman stood away from the screen, and lifting up his head, sang two or three words. The notes ascended in a trembling richness, and became harmonious with their own echoes, till their choric vibrations softened and faded into a whisper.

"It reminds me," said Mrs. Romford eagerly, "of the Baptistery at Pisa."

"And don't you remember," added her husband, "the fellow at Grindelwald with the reed horn?"

"Ask him to do it again," Laura said to Reden.

When they passed round the interior once more, they descended to the crypt and saw the coffins of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. On leaving the building, their guide presented Mrs. Romford and Laura with a handful of pink rose petals from the gardens.

Mrs. Romford was loud in her enthusiasm as they came outside the august entrance, and began to perambulate beside the towering walls. The Major and Captain Reden stopped to light cigars. Beyond the Taj, Laura caught a glimpse of open country, and moved across the marble platform, which shone with starlight.

At the balustrade which stopped her progress, standing with her back to the Taj and its mosques of red sandstone, its four minarets, and its cypress garden cool with terraces of water and sweet with the heavy scent of flowers — standing with her back to all this crowding loveliness — she looked upon a scene so different and yet so simply majestic that it was instantly an exaltation to her senses.

Below her gaze the vast curve of the Jumna, huge as

a sea, shone like silver in the midst of a plain which was the colour of dull gold. It seemed to reflect, in a mist of powdered radiance, the glow of the burning stars high in the night's roof, so that the deep purple of the sky had less of the atmosphere of starlight than the yellow earth with its swerving flood of silver water. This far-stretching earth was like a desert. Here and there a cluster of lights told of human habitations, but for the most part it was like a desert. And it had the sadness, and patience, and rebuke of a desert — that sense of unchangeable infinity and everlasting austerity which compels reverence in the highest, and gives pause of some kind even to the most flippant.

Swollen by the rains, the splendid river had overflowed its banks, and spread itself in glittering flood across the plain. The presence of this huge mass of water had filled the air with moisture and softened all the air with mist. Laura was conscious of cold, of softness, of splendour, and of eternity in this tremendous landscape.

Reden came to her side. The scent of his cigar was Laura's first awareness of his presence. "You have discovered the best of the Taj," he said quietly. "The tourist who comes in the cold weather never gets this view. He sees a narrow river and an arid plain; the whole thing sharp and hard. Isn't this fine — the steam of the earth after the rains, the big river, and the soft mist which is like a woman's kiss?"

"It is beautiful," she replied.

He came a little closer, and without looking at her, said more softly, "Mrs. Ashworth, I count myself blest of heaven for being the first man to stand at your side in the gardens of the Taj. I have enjoyed it through you. It has never impressed me half so much before. I knew you would respond to it, but I didn't foresee how

delightful it would be to watch you and feel it reflected from your soul."

She half turned to go, saying, "I've enjoyed it very much." Then she stopped, and, pointing, asked, "What are those lights over there?"

He answered her quickly, and then turning so that they were face to face, said with some eagerness, "For the first time in my life, I believe in reincarnation. I believe that you are the Crown of the Palace, and that I am Shah Jahan; for, may the gods forgive me, Mrs. Ashworth, I think you are the most beautiful creature alive."

She met his gaze, smiled, half lifted her eyebrows, and said without offence and without coldness, "The Taj is a strong wine, Captain Reden; I think you have drunk too much of it."

He put his hand on her arm as she moved away. "Don't go for a minute," he said, almost with authority. "There's something I want to tell you."

She raised her hand to her face, and as she inhaled the fragrance of the rose petals she watched him with steady eyes.

"No man," he said, in his quick, intimate, and most persuasive manner, "can be blamed for admiring a beautiful woman. Now, can he? It's part of life. And this place cries out that love is a splendid thing. Don't you feel that? I am not ashamed that you have mastered me and snapped my control like a piece of cotton. I glory in my weakness. You have made me love you, and in my love everything else is swallowed up. I don't care what happens. I love you. You are the most adorable thing alive."

She lowered her hand. "I am flattered," she said; "but I am not befooled. Now we will join the Romfords."

"Oh, come; I don't believe you are as cold as this marble," he cried, intercepting her path. "You are acting a part. Be natural, like an angel, and smile upon me. Come, now, you were made for passion! You know that. A smile. Give me a smile. I am consumed with love for you."

"You said you were purposely irreverent on our way here," Laura responded quietly. "Are you now purposely dishonourable? You are spoiling it all for me. Please don't jest any more. The place is too beautiful and sacred."

She moved away, and as he walked at her side he said quickly, "I'm sorry if I have hurt your feelings, and I wouldn't for all the world spoil your pleasure in a single thing; but I want you to know that there is no jest in what I have said. You must make allowance. Remember, you are very beautiful. Remember, that I have been a great deal in your society. Do you suppose it is natural that I should be as insensible to passion when I am near you, as when I am talking to an ugly woman, a dull woman, or an old woman? At least you must make allowance. If you cannot let me love you, at least have pity on me and make your dismissal kind as possible."

"Kind!" she said, with a touch of scorn. "One is not kind in resenting an insult."

"An insult!"

"What else?"

"You don't mean to tell me—"

"Captain Reden, you have made a mistake. Let it stop at that. I do not even ask for an apology. Let us forget your blunder — both of us."

She drove back to the hotel with Mrs. Romford. Her feelings were more than ruffled; she was conscious of a deep resentment.

Across her angry thoughts came constantly the suggestion that Basil had probably spoken to many women, in those adventures of which he had boasted, just as Captain Reden had dared to speak to her. She felt herself superior to her husband as well as to this whispering philanderer. She was not jealous of Ashworth, she was annoyed that such a man had become her husband.

During the remaining days of this little holiday, Captain Reden treated her with a studied respect, wearing in his eyes an appealing look, a hurt expression, and in all their commerce striving to reach her good graces through the door of pity. But Laura held him off with a decisive coldness. She found that he spoilt her pleasure when they were sight-seeing, and bored her with a giggling inanity — a perpetual effort to be funny and amusing — when they were taking their meals or resting in the hotel.

It was impossible for a thoughtful, a reflective, and an æsthetic mind, genuinely interested in life, to be happy and unconscious of superiority in the society of Major and Mrs. Romford, dull people, and Captain Reden, a flaneur without parts of any kind. They grated on Laura. During the long hours they spent in Agra Fort she was irritated almost to the point of rudeness by the stupidity and satisfied vulgarity of her companions. Agra Fort is one of the supreme triumphs of the Moghul Empire. Its monstrous walls of dark red sandstone, which burn in the sunset to the colour of orange, rise up seventy feet towards the blue sky, and make a circuit of a mile and a half; and in this vast and lofty enclosure the traveller wanders from the courtyard, pavilions, arcades, and kiosks of the Pearl Mosque, which is the noblest temple ever erected for the soul's communion with God, to the inlaid marble

palaces of Akbar and Shah Jahan, and to the Jasmine Tower mounted on one of the rounded bastions of the Fort from whose marble windows Mumtaz Mahal must often have leaned, looking across the river and thinking of Shah Jahan, that loving and adoring husband and almost master of the world.

Never before had the romantic truth of the great Moghuls come home so closely to Laura. She passed from chamber to chamber, through the carved gateways and under the fretted arches of these splendid palaces, not only studying the exquisite work of inlaid precious stones, of marble walls pierced and carved till they were like old lace, of floors jewel-like in their radiance, of shallow fountains scooped out of these marble floors so that they looked like lilies floating on a lake, and of ceilings fluted, carved, and illumined with crimson and gold; not only did she see all this crowding and yet peaceful loveliness, with the understanding eyes of an artist, but by the force of her imaginative temperament she strewed the floors with rugs, filled the air with scents and perfumes, and peopled every room with glittering warriors and dark-eyed women robed in shining silk. For her the palaces were thronged with the ghosts of their splendid past. She heard a step and the rustle of raiment on every twisting stair, the clank of swords and the neighing of horses in every courtyard, the clink of goblets and a splashing of fountains in the pavilions, and heard singing and laughter in every chamber, and saw lovers looking from the open windows to the sunset and the stars.

At last India cast her spell over the mind of this Englishwoman and visited her heart with that magic of the East which is irresistible.

But to have Mrs. Romford making gauche remarks on one side, to hear the banalities of Major Romford

on the other side, and to find herself face to face with her persecuting philanderer whithersoever she turned—this was to harass and irritate and distract poor Laura till she could sometimes almost have screamed with nervous pain.

On the eve of their departure, after a festive dinner at which Major Romford had insisted upon providing a magnum of indifferent champagne, Reden whispered to Laura in the lounge of the hotel, just as they had finished their coffee and liqueurs, "I want to speak to you in private, if I may, Mrs. Ashworth; will you come into the garden for a moment?"

Mrs. Romford began to study a soiled and grubby fashion paper several months old; Major Romford, smoking a long cigar and very red of face, wandered about the lounge looking at pictures and glancing at the other guests out of the corners of his little green eyes. Laura, who did not wish to appear unkind or ungracious, rose from her chair and, drawing her lace shawl about her, went towards the door.

As they entered the garden, Reden threw away his cigar, and placing his hands in the pockets of his dinner jacket, his head raised, his eyes looking at the stars above the trees, began to speak in a tone of voice which was at once deferential and appealing.

"This is the last night of our trip," he said; "an experience which has been perfectly enchanting to me in more ways than one; and yet I am more conscious of sadness at this moment that I have ever been before in my whole life. I feel that I have made a mistake. That I have blundered our friendship. That I have lost something infinitely precious to me in seeking to gain that which I now see, very bitterly, to be as much beyond my reach as it is beyond my right. I want you, Mrs. Ashworth, to tell me that you forget and forgive, and

that you will try and take me back on the old terms. I want to end up our little trip together with a reconciliation."

He stopped in the shadow of some dark trees, and faced her. She saw him indistinctly — just the dim lustre of his eyes, the grey oval of his face, the blurred whiteness of his shirt-front, the obscure and uncertain darkness of his clothes. And looking at him, she wondered if she was any clearer to his eyes, and hoped that the moonlight in the trees did not reveal her with distinctness. She drew the shawl closer round her, and with one hand holding it over her breast, answered him in a voice that was entirely without nervousness or emotion of any kind.

"There is no reason why we should not be friends," she replied. "I only ask you to respect me in order that I may respect you. It would be rather foolish of us both, I think, to attempt anything dramatic in the shape of a reconciliation. There is nothing romantic between us. We need only respect each other, and go on as before."

He was thinking to himself, "You are the coldest and most insolent baggage I've ever wasted time over; but thank goodness you are not likely to make a scene with your husband." He said to her, in his hurt tone of voice, "You will not say that you forgive me?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think it is quite big enough for that."

"Then you are not greatly hurt?"

She considered for a moment. "Oh, I suppose men do talk to married women as you spoke to me; I suppose it's really nothing unusual; but, yes — I did feel hurt, I felt injured, to be taken for a woman of that kind."

"Men and women amuse themselves with flirtation,"

he said, affecting a distant haughtiness. "It helps to pass the time. It is the last vestige of romance left to a dull age. Whether they are contemptible I do not pretend to judge. I am not particularly religious. But if you think that my admiration is — perhaps I had better put it in the past tense — but if you think my admiration was merely a first move in a game of flirtation, you do me an injustice." Hope grew warm in his breast. With warmth in his voice, drawing a little closer, to her, he exclaimed, "Good Lord, Mrs. Ashworth, do you think that you create in a man like me nothing grander than a mere insolent, what shall I say? — a mere insolent — dash it, I don't know what the word is — but I mean, you have moved me to something higher and better than a mere vulgar desire to flirt with you. Good Lord, I should think so! It's not only your face and your figure that I admire; it's your character, your personality. When I am with you I feel a better man. I want you for a friend. You don't know how greatly I want you. And if I can't be content with the mere chatter of friendship over the teacups, a kind of distant politeness such as exists between you and the padre, for instance, am I to blame? Hang it all, Mrs. Ashworth, you must know the kind of man I am. A poor fool in many ways, I dare say; not clever and brilliant like a carpet knight in a Kensington drawing-room; but I am a man, with a man's feelings, and a man's ambitions; and I think you might show me a little more pity and a little more tenderness. I do really."

She had found herself smiling in the middle of this address. She had watched almost with contempt the man's shadow face and his dusky body, taut with affected emotion. But towards the end, even while she saw through his self-depreciation and despised him for

a dull creature, she felt it due to herself to show him at least the semblance of kindness.

"I am so glad," she said, almost cheerfully, "that you are not a mere stupid philanderer. And I am quite sure you would not be dishonourable. So, it seems quite easy for us to renew our friendship. You will keep your head, and I will pour out the tea without haughtiness, and —"

He stepped towards her. Even now he might take the citadel by storm. "Good God, Mrs. Ashworth!" he exclaimed, half lifting his hands; "don't you know that I'm madly in love with you? For pity's sake —"

She turned abruptly away and moved into the full light of the garden.

He followed her quickly. "Have you no pity for me?" he cried impulsively. "Can't you find it in your heart to say one single word of kindness? Good Lord, I'll not believe it of you. I love you. Nothing in my loves makes me ashamed. It's a hopeless love, I know. But there it is — as strong and deep a love as ever you will create in a man's heart. If you reject it, at least do not disdain it with contempt."

"There is only one thing I can say that you will understand," she replied coolly, walking without haste or annoyance towards the hotel. "I do not love you. And your love moves me to neither pity nor contempt."

"Very well!" he exclaimed. "Very well! Now I know that —"

"You have wasted your time!"

"No. That your heart is inhuman."

"I can imagine," she replied, with a real contempt, "that the hearts you deal in have to be excessively human."

He said nothing, out of his depths for the first time in a rather limited experience of women. "No go!"

he reflected to himself; "She's a prig and nothing more; I thought better of her."

"You will understand," she said, as they reached the steps of the hotel, "that our friendship, whatever it was, has come to an end."

"Oh, certainly!" he answered, with a mordant laugh, which he considered was rather telling.

As Laura lay in bed that night she was teased by the thought that perhaps Basil, before he married her, had been just such a man as Reden.

CHAPTER V

BASIL met his wife at the station. He had suffered from the morbid imaginings of jealousy during her absence and found it difficult to appear natural and happy in greeting the travellers. He was conscious of a sick feeling in his heart, a numb and bruised sensation in his mind. He knew that this feeling arose not so much from love of Laura as from his own wounded pride and self-esteem. But he laid the blame upon his wife.

Even in his nervousness he observed a singular constraint in Laura's manner as she bade good-bye to Reden; instead, however, of finding comfort in this evidence against his suspicions he felt himself plunged into far deeper gloom. Clearly, he thought, there has been something between them, something between my wife and another man of which I shall be kept in ignorance. He was utterly wretched.

He drove her back to the bungalow in his little bamboo cart, and talked rather rapidly of cantonment gossip and changes in the regiment. He spoke about getting his company soon after Christmas. Laura noticed the strain in his voice and realised that she had come back to a dull life.

The solitary tree in the compound seemed to say to her, " Nothing has changed; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be; I am the symbol of monotony, and you are its victim." The salaaming servants on the verandah, congregated to pay respects to their Mem Sahib, seemed like warders at a goal waiting to receive a prisoner.

They had made tea for her, and after the comfort and luxury of the hotel at Agra this meal gave her a sense of nausea. She could smell the sourness of the bread and the rancid quality of the butter as she poured out the tea, which tasted of the pot. The milk was like water in which a paint-brush filled with blue had been left standing. The dusty grey-coloured sugar was sprinkled with smuts.

The shabby melancholy of the bungalow had never before struck her so disagreeably.

She took a bath in the miserable zinc tub which stood in the dark and sloppy, sink-like annex of her bedroom, and after putting on a dinner gown without the least care as to how it suited her, passed through the Khus-Khus tatties into the drawing-room. She picked up a book from a wickerwork table and seating herself in a little chair near the window began to read. Basil came from the verandah and passed, without speaking, into the bedroom. While she endeavoured to keep her attention on the book she heard him emptying his pockets and whistling as he went to and fro in the other room.

The contrast between the dinner and the meals she had enjoyed in Agra was not greater than the contrast between the two environments. If the Romfords had been dull or Captain Reden annoyingly amusing, still there had always been the sense of human company and the distraction of watching other people. But here it was a bad dinner, coarse china, thick glass, dull silver, cheap linen, and for company, one man who apparently wanted to quarrel, and who, at any rate, had ceased to interest her.

"You are eating nothing," he said to her.

"I am not hungry."

"I'm afraid this is rather a poor show for you after Agra."

She smiled.

After dinner they sat in the drawing-room, Laura reading her book beside the lamp, Basil at a little distance, smoking his pipe and turning the pages of the *Civil and Military Gazette,* his legs stretched out, his feet crossed, the chair creaking as he folded and unfolded the paper.

Presently he said to her, the pipe between his teeth, the paper still in his hands and half hiding his face from her, "You did not appear to take a very cordial farewell of your friends at the station."

She lowered her book, and looked across at him, "Are you finding fault with me?" she asked.

He pretended to smile, and, turning the paper, said, "Not in the least! I was only wondering if the party had been a success."

"Not particularly," she answered.

"What was the matter?"

"Oh, they were rather dull."

"I can imagine that the Romfords might get upon one's nerves!" He lowered the paper, and stole a glance at her. Her calm eyes, fixed upon him and expressing neither kindness nor interest, made him uneasy, and he looked away, but did not again raise the paper which lay across his lap. He was in the mood of a jealous man who seeks to get rid of a feeling of inferiority by provoking a quarrel. "You didn't write," he said, "so I had no idea how you were getting on; but I imagined it might be rather trying. Romford is a bore, his wife is as empty as a drum, and Reden is pretty generally considered an ass. I felt sorry for you."

"However, I enjoyed Agra itself."

"Well, there's nothing much there except the Taj."

"Not the Fort?"

"It's nothing to Delhi. Did you see the Taj at night?"

"Yes."

"The whole party went, I suppose?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "Did the poetic Reden wax romantic?"

"In what way?"

"The moonlight, the marbles, the cypresses, the river, and the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal?"

"I don't think any of them felt the beauty of it very deeply."

"No, perhaps not. However, the garden is just the sort of *milieu* that a fellow like Reden would choose for a display of his profoundest feelings!"

"I wondered while I was there," she said, with some acerbity, "whether you had ever made use of the Taj in that way."

"I?"

"In those adventures with married women of which you boasted to me before I went away."

"Oh, you can put that idea out of your head."

"And something out of my heart at the same time."

"I don't understand?"

She held the hanging chain round her neck with both hands, and began to saw it quietly up and down, her eyes regarding him with a displeasure that seemed to increase as she spoke. "I can't respect a man," she said, rather hotly, "who has been so dishonourable as to run after married women. It seems to me about the lowest thing a man can do. I think it's very much worse than a girl going wrong. It's breaking the law, like a thief or a forger. There's something so cunning and creeping and underhand about it. A man who deceives a husband and sets himself to destroy the honour of a weaker creature, instead of guarding it, is a deceitful

hypocrite and a mean criminal. I have contempt for such a person. Don't think I'm in the least jealous." She snorted disdainfully. "I should despise myself if I felt hurt or injured by such a man."

The paper slid from his knee and he sat up in his chair. "Laura, my darling," he said gladly, "I love you for what you have said." He leaned forward and looked at her eagerly, his eyes shining and blinking with pleasure. "I know now the good sort you are, as I never knew it before. I wasn't afraid to trust you when you went away, on my honour I wasn't; I only felt angry that you might be exposed to insult. And what I said to you about myself was just a boy's foolish bragging; I wanted to pose as a man of the world, to impress you with my vast experience! Honour bright!" He got up and crossed the room to her. "I have never made love to a married woman," he said, leaning over her from the side of her chair, his lips close to her ear. "I was never that kind of man. I don't think I ever flirted with a girl or woman till I saw you." He leaned closer and kissed her. "How you must have been hating me with your pure mind," he said tenderly. "But it's all over now. We're better friends than ever. Kiss me, my love, and say you forgive me."

She raised her hands, took his face between them, and kissed his lips. "I'm so glad," she whispered, and kissed him again. "I did not want to hate you," she said gently. Then, when she had kissed him again, she put his face away from her, and said, "We will never be stupid and foolish any more. We'll try and make our life a great success, won't we? I feel much better now; I love this cold weather; the change has done me good; and to-morrow I mean to see if I can't make your home more comfortable"

She was disappointed to find that he did not stir in

her, despite this reconciliation, so frank and sincere on her part, any deep and passionate feelings of admiration. She was conscious of boyishness and immaturity, of some lack of strength, power, and profundity, in his nature. Most loyally she endeavoured to love him without criticism, but always she was aware, most unhappily, of a sense of superiority in herself. He was not only boyish, not only uninteresting, he was selfish.

However, she set herself, with an increased knowledge of India, to make the bungalow and its cuisine less like a boarding-house. She was fretted by want of means, and often irritated by the stupidity of the servants, but she prosecuted her efforts and gradually transformed the barrack-like building into something that bore a faint resemblance to an Englishman's idea of a home.

Basil never noticed these reforms. If she managed to buy a few flowers for the dinner table he did not observe them till she pointed them out to him. When she bought some little silver filigree dishes for sweetmeats with the dessert, he said to her, "I hope you aren't running into debt!"

She had all the desires of her warm and sensuous nature for soft clothing, for refinements of detail in her lying-down and her uprising, for beauty and tenderness in the conditions of her environment. It irked her to be obliged to darn merino stockings, to patch a woollen night-gown, to turn a dress, to wear shabby shoes, and to see the lace on her evening dresses growing soiled and shabby. But she went on with her destiny, and never uttered complaint to Basil or anyone else.

Basil got his company with the new year, and their circumstances were a little bettered. But as the hot weather came with fiery breath and brazen menace, as the windows and doors shut earlier and earlier every day, and as the house darkened more and more and the

atmosphere became almost with every hour more stifling and exhausting, Laura lost much of her determination to live gallantly with fate.

She found the people exasperatingly dull and commonplace. There was never any conversation. It was nothing but chatter. Beyond the evening visit to the club and an occasional dinner-party, there was absolutely no incident to break the intolerable monotony of the burning, listless, suffocating barrack life.

To save money was difficult. In spite of all her precautions, the bills of the household mounted up and swallowed week by week the increase in their income. "It's no use trying to beat the servants!" Basil said to her, with an easy laugh; "they know just as well as we do what is the extra amount of my pay, and they'll get their share of it whatever traps you lay for them."

Towards the end of the hot weather a great joy came to Laura. She was promised the blessing of motherhood.

Through the rains she lived with a song at her heart, radiant with an internal joy. She recalled the delight she had experienced as a little child when King lay in his cradle or crawled towards her on the hearth-rug of the nursery; she remembered, too, how keen had been her suffering when Olive asked her not to nurse the children for fear of giving them consumption. And now, she was to have a child of her own, a little life, flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone! How wonderful it would be to look into those new-born eyes, to put her finger into the grip of those little pink hands, to feel the little lips drawing life and strength from her breast.

She was able to enjoy the first few weeks of the cold weather, going out to picnics, to theatricals and concerts, visiting some of the more interesting cities near about, and driving with Basil in the bright afternoons and long

evenings in the little bamboo cart which made her think of a perambulator. And she was not dull when these festivities were curtailed. She got a book from the library about maternity and the care of infants, and read it from cover to cover, making wonderfully long notes in a penny exercise book which she kept carefully hidden in a drawer.

She knew at last why she had been unhappy, why the Indian climate had so oppressed and deformed her nature; it was because she had nothing to love, tend, and watch over with incessant care. Her lonely life had lacked a continual companionship and consecration. But now, it would be quite happy. She came to herself. The sweetness and tenderness of her character revived. A child would give her something to live for. It was beautiful to see how she gave herself with fresh energy to making the bungalow a home.

But, alas, her dream was broken at a time when she felt most certain of joy. She was taken suddenly ill in the middle of the night, and before Basil had returned with the doctor she knew that her hope had perished.

For several weeks she lay exhausted and pale, the victim of a terrible depression. The kind nursing of Mrs. Toynbee, and the skill of an able doctor of the I.M.S., saved her life, and roused her out of a torpor which had seemed to herself, and to others, even to Basil, incurable. She was so wretched and so weak and so bitterly disappointed, that she did not want to live. She came back to life, as it were, against her will. There was a settled look of melancholy in her eyes which frightened people.

Before the hot weather came, the doctor said to Basil, "We must get your wife to the hills. It's impossible for her to stay here."

"To Simla?"

"Yes, that would be the best place. There are one or two reasonable hotels where she could be comfortable enough. She must have that air."

"Well, of course, if you say so, she must go," said Basil. And he reflected bitterly to himself, "For the first time in my life I shall have to borrow money."

Other feelings came to him before she went away. He could not rid himself of the thought that alone in Simla she would be exposed to a hundred temptations. Once more he found himself consumed by jealousy. If only the child had come! He had welcomed her maternity as an insurance of his security.

He was very kind and gentle to her during these last days, seeking to leave upon her mind a good impression of himself. "I shall miss you frightfully," he kept saying to her; "but so long as you come back well and strong, I shan't mind." He never hinted that he had the smallest misgiving about her. But she saw that he did not wish her to go.

CHAPTER VI

BASIL went with Laura to the railway station. She was to travel by the night mail, which reaches Kalka soon after eight o'clock in the morning. It was late in the afternoon when they drove into the station yard, crowded with dusty vehicles and noisy Indians: the lamps were burning with a pale radiance in the primrose glow of the sunset.

Laura, whose complexion had all the softness and brilliance of convalescence, was dressed in a long fawn-coloured ulster and wore a small travelling toque on her beautiful hair. Many of the natives squatting on the platform looked up at her and spoke openly to each other of her height, her hair, her complexion, and her eyes. The European and Eurasian officials, waiting for the mail train, also looked with admiration at this handsome creature. Basil, who was in uniform, in the midst of his real grief at parting from Laura felt proud of the attention she attracted.

The huge engine of the mail came into sight, its smoke in the long distance rushing behind it, the blackness of its mass blocking out a great space of the sunset. The station lost its languid apathy and became suddenly astir. Crowds of Indians pressed up the platform talking in loud voices, their bundles grasped in one hand, their long sticks carried in the other. A flock of hooded women, with little peep-holes of crochet-work over the eyes, ran with a tinkling of jewellery in front of a tall Mussulman who appeared to be their drover as well as their husband. Bannias went pushing by, carrying in

their arms little fat-faced brown-eyed boys whose caps and jackets glittered with sequins and tinsel. Half-naked station coolies, chewing betel, stood on the edge of the platform, squirting blood-coloured saliva on to the metals and scratching themselves here and there like a dog with fleas.

The roar of the on-coming train drowned the shrill babel of humanity; steam was shut off; there was a sharp rattle over the points; then, shaking the platform, the huge Scotch engine thundered into the station, and seemed to bring with it all the dust of India and the darkness of the falling night.

"There's no need for hurry," Basil said, keeping the crowd from Laura with his cane. "The train stops here for five minutes, and your place is engaged."

They waited till the worst of the crowding was over, and then walked beside the tall train looking up for Laura's name on one of the carriages reserved for ladies. Their bearer followed with her bedding and hand baggage. When the carriage was found, this servant hurried in and made up the bed; Laura and Basil remained on the platform, Laura leaning on her sunshade, Basil swinging his cane. Both of them found it rather difficult to talk.

Two men watched them. These travellers had descended from separate carriages of the train to stretch their legs on the platform: one of them, a broad-shouldered and flaxen-haired man of thirty, was evidently a soldier; the other, an older, darker, and clean-shaven man, looked as if he belonged to the Indian Civil Service. The soldier appeared to be curiously, almost excitedly, interested in Laura; the other was interested in a quieter and more reflective manner. The young soldier walked to and fro, passing and repassing Basil and his wife, each time staring openly at Laura. The other remained

standing at the back of the platform, watching not only the young couple at the carriage door, but noticing also the studious glances of the other man.

"You won't scruple to write and ask me for any money you may want," Basil said to her. "You must take the greatest care of yourself and keep clear of worry."

"I hate to be such an expense to you," Laura answered. "It's an awful nuisance for you."

"My dear child, don't talk like that." With one hand he struck his leg with the cane, with the other he held a scrap of paper to his mouth.

"I shan't spend a penny more than is absolutely necessary."

"Oh, but you mustn't stint yourself."

"And I shall be thinking of you all the time. It's horrid that I shall be in the hills while you are sweltering in the plains."

He smiled. "I've only been to the hills once in my life. I don't mind the hot weather in the least. You know I don't. So you mustn't worry about me."

Laura looked across the platform and encountered the gaze of the man at the back of the station. He glanced aside almost at once, but she continued to look at him. He reminded her vaguely of the best men she had known at Cambridge, vigorous, athletic, and intellectual men. She was interested to see this type of man in India, and wondered what he might be.

"Don't forget you'll have to hurry at Kalka," said Basil. "They tell me the train is always crowded. It's only a bit of a thing."

"I shall be all right."

"You get breakfast at a place called Barogh."

"Yes."

"But if you can manage it, try and get a cup of tea at Kalka."

As he spoke, he became aware of the young sandy-haired man. He saw that Laura had attracted the admiration of this man and became instantly very miserable with jealousy. All his feelings of kindness towards his wife were at once checked by an angry resentment. He hated the man who dared to look at his wife so insolently; worse, he almost hated Laura for attracting such brazen admiration.

"You'll meet some pretty rotten people in Simla," Basil said, in a voice so different that Laura at once thought that he had noticed her interest in the tall clean-shaven man at the back of the station. "I needn't warn you, I know, that some of them are pretty dangerous; even to know them is a risk of reputation."

"I'm not in the least afraid of myself," Laura answered.

He instantly changed his mind. "You're splendid!" he exclaimed. "No man has a better wife, I should feel myself the poorest ass on earth if I doubted you for a single moment. It is just because you are such a topping woman that I get riled to think of —"

The bearer came smiling from the carriage. A whistle was blown. There was a general movement towards the train.

Laura stepped upon the platform at the end of her carriage, and stooping down, one hand, in which was her sunshade, holding the brass rail, offered the other with a smile to Basil. She looked so beautiful that he gave way to impulse, and stepping up beside her, kissed her cheek. The young soldier who had been watching Laura was now looking for his carriage; but the other man, whom Basil had not noticed, still stood at the back of the station with his eyes directed towards them.

The whistle was blown again. Flags were waved. The Eurasian guards, looking at fat silver watches, as

they hurried with a rolling motion of self-importance beside the train, cursed the driver for not instantly obeying their command to get started.

Basil stepped down to the platform, as the tall man came slowly forward to the train and approached the carriage where a servant was standing ready for him. Laura, smiling her farewells to Basil, was aware that this man who interested her had entered a carriage close to her own. She wondered whether he was going to Simla. Basil, glancing up the train for a moment, saw that the insolent young soldier was leaning from the platform of his carriage and looking back towards Laura.

"You'll write often?" he said, looking up at her, and striking his leg once again with the cane.

She smiled and nodded.

"I shall write as often as I can," he said, "but my letters will be only the dull gossip of the cantonments."

"I shall love to have them."

He thought she had never looked so beautiful as she did just then — standing above him in her long ulster, her radiant face inclined towards him, the eyes and lips smiling with gentle tenderness the farewells that both felt were so difficult to utter.

The train moved forward.

He walked beside her for a few moments, holding to the brass rail, and looking up at her. "I shall miss you most frightfully," he said. "You won't ever forget that, will you? It will be a red-letter day for me when I come to meet you here. Good-bye, Laura."

He let go the rail, slowed down his paces, and presently stood still, waving his cane and striving to keep a smile in his eyes and on his lips as he watched her going away from him. When he turned about it appeared to be dark in the station and almost cold.

CHAPTER VII

LAURA woke before the train reached Kalka, and made up her own bed. Another woman in the carriage invited her to wait and let her servant attend to this duty, but Laura declined her kindness. The woman was of the Mrs. Braggel type. Besides, Laura wanted to manage for herself. She had formed the resolution to be practical and independent, above all things to be economical.

She descended from the train at Kalka, and after a few moments found a coolie to go into the carriage and get her things. By the time she reached the little toy-train that climbs the mountains to Simla, every carriage appeared to be crowded with travellers.

"Forgive me," said a pleasant voice dimly familiar to her, "but I am sure you must be Miss Thornton."

She turned and recognised in a sandy-haired and freckle-faced man at her side, Philly Syston, the singer of "The General" at Margate.

"I am now Mrs. Ashworth," she said, with a smile. "I remember you," she added, taking his hand and laughing rather nervously.

"Are you going to Simla?" he asked, in a cheerful and boyish manner, which suited well with his look, a look half knowing and half bashful.

"If I can find a place in the train," she answered, glancing away. There was a constant going to and fro of excited passengers and quarrelling coolies.

"I've got an extra seat, will you take it?" he asked, saving her from a barrow of luggage.

"Yes, if I may; thank you very much; but don't you require it for someone else?"

"Not in the least. I bagged two seats in case you might — I mean, I saw you down the line, and I anticipated that you might find it difficult to get a place. What about your baggage? They won't let you take anything except a paper bag and a powder-puff into the carriages! Is this your coolie? Well, look here, I'll put you into the carriage and then see about your luggage. Come along. What an infernal noise!" He called up his servant, gave an order, and then conducted Laura to the place he had reserved for her. When he returned, a waiter was at his heels with coffee and bread-and-butter and marmalade.

"This is the best of luck," he said to her, in the most friendly and jovial manner. "It's awfully good to see you again. What could be nicer than to be reminded in India of Margate? Think of the wintry waves breaking now on those forsaken sands. How much sugar do you like? By that question I declare myself to be *not* your husband! What a lark! Look here, will you let me spread the marmalade for you? — I'll make you a scrumptious sandwich. Isn't it ripping to get chota-hazri in this morning air? I slept like a top; did you? The coffee's not half bad, is it?"

The wind blew cold and refreshing into the carriage through the open window away from the sun. On the other side brown-coloured wooden shutters excluded the glare. The little carriage was empty at the moment except for themselves, the other places being occupied by coats and rugs.

"How long have you been out?" he asked, cup in hand, smiling and munching, the pleasantest-looking fellow in the world. "As long as that? — really? The deuce take it. Why haven't we met before? What's

your husband in? The Fifth Bahadurs? Don't know 'em. I've been on the staff for a couple of years. That's no fun, I can assure you. They work one like the very dickens nowadays. Still, it's more interesting than being with the regiment."

She looked away from him, wondering whether he was married, and vaguely disturbed at the thought of travelling with him on this long journey to Simla. It was nearly half-past eight. She would be obliged to sit beside him until three o'clock. He would probably lunch with her at Barogh. She disliked his manner of cool appropriation and almost chaffing intimacy; but he had been kind and thoughtful; she was really grateful to him; and in any case there was nothing to do but accept the inevitable. "If I stand too much upon my dignity," she reflected, "he will think I still suffer from my folly."

A waiter from the refreshment room came for the tray. Syston curtly ordered him to wait, in Hindustani, and almost in the same breath turned smiling to Laura. "These beggars," he said, "always think that one is going to rob them of a tin spoon or a cracked milk-jug!" He continued to eat his breakfast.

The carriage filled up; the waiter stood at the door, beseechingly, plaintively, now salaaming, and now holding out his hand for payment. The train was moving when Syston allowed him to take the tray and threw him a coin. "You don't mind smoking, I hope?" he asked Laura, taking out his pipe and tobacco pouch. The waiter held out his hand for more bakshish, imploringly. Syston consigned him to infernal regions in a rather vigorous Hindustani. "Now we're off!" he said, laughing; "you'll enjoy this part of the journey."

He knew one or two men in the carriage, and spoke to them, but did not introduce them to Laura.

The train made a wide sweeping curve and then began

its long climb into the mountains, jogging up with a series of little jerks, which shook everybody in the carriage and made Laura laugh with amusement.

"This is how the Governor-General and the Commander-in-Chief go to Simla," said Syston, "like bottles of medicine! Some people can't stand it. It shakes the teeth out of one's gums, doesn't it? Lots of ladies suffer from *mal-de-mer*. It's worse going down. I generally take a tonga for my departure."

The colour of the country round about these foothills of the Himalayas was like a camel's coat — a worn and dusty fawn. There were trees of every kind, and some notable cactus. Laura saw a number of large grey monkeys with a white fringe of beard round their little black faces, running across a field to a clump of bamboos. Syston spoke about the country and foretold beautiful views higher up.

"But Simla is not a bit what it was some years ago," he said. "All the fun and frolic have been knocked on the head. A woman gets a better time at Mussoorie. I assure you we are a jolly sight harder worked at Simla than we are in the plains. Any fooling ends in a man being sent down like a shot. We're a very moral Government nowadays!"

The air became fresher at every turn into the mountains. In spite of the jerking of the train, Laura felt exhilarated.

At Barogh, which they reached soon after eleven o'clock, he took her to breakfast in the pleasant refreshment room above the garden of the station. As they sat down Laura saw that the man whom she had noticed on the previous night was sitting at the next table. For some reason or another, the sight of this man made her distressed at the companionship of Philly Syston.

As she was going out of the refreshment room her

eyes encountered those of the stranger, and he did not immediately look away. Laura was vexed that a flush of colour came to her cheeks. She stopped, turned round, waited a moment for Syston, and then went on alone.

Syston overtook her on the descent to the platform. The other man was standing there looking at the flowers.

As they passed him Laura said in her most matter-of-fact way, "You will let me know my share of the bill, Captain Syston." Syston laughed. "Oh, nonsense!" he said; "how can you suggest such a base thing?" She felt vexed and angry with herself. "Please, I insist," she said. Syston replied, drawing closer to her, "When I deduct the whole of this bill from the immense sum I owe you for the pleasure and delight of your society, I am bankrupt in your favour." Laura endeavoured to laugh. "All the more reason," she answered, "why I should pay for my own breakfast."

The journey became more interesting. At one of the small stations where they stopped, Syston took her out on the platform to get her first view of Simla. She saw beautiful deep blue hills high in the air against white clouds; a dense and solid phalanx of mountain-peaks, shining with snow, filled the whole distant horizon with a sense of strength and everlasting endurance; in the midst of the hills was one almost black in the depth of its colour, black to its very point with a density of trees, and round about its base were congregated buildings of pale orange with silver-coloured roofs.

"That dark hill is Jacko, our famous mountain," said Syston; "and those houses are Simla — the superb and gorgeous Simla. The roofs, by the way, are corrugated iron! But it's a fine view, isn't it?"

"It looks almost close to us," said Laura.

"Ah, but you know the poem, *Does the road wind all the way? — ay! all the way.* That's how we go to Simla; round and round, all the way. There's one place higher up the line where it looks as if you could throw a stone into the streets of the town; but it's over an hour from there before you reach it."

As the train ascended into the cold and splendid air of the mountains, Laura was more and more enchanted by the majesty of the scenery. She looked down into infinite depths, and saw the track over which she had passed an hour or more ago, lying like a little steel horse-shoe far below her, in the midst of trees and terraced fields of green rice. Close to her were the red-gold sides of the mountains, patched with glittering snow, veined with wild flowers and straggling dry roots of trees, and dark with pines. High above her, against the brilliant sky, were the massy crests of the Himalayas flashing their snows in the full blaze of the sun. It was impossible, Laura felt, to look upon the immensity and superb grandeur of this monumental glory, strewn over the world in a god-like prodigality, without a sense of exaltation, without the sensation that life is something vaster and more august than society makes it. But one of the men in the carriage was reading a newspaper, two others were talking about polo with their backs to the scenery, and Syston was for ever laughing and chattering even in his admiration of the mountains.

He asked her where she intended to stay; and when he learned the name of the hotel, he raised his eyebrows, compressed his lips, and shook his head with disapproval.

"You won't like it," he said. "I'm sure you won't be comfortable there." He recommended another hotel, asked that he might be allowed to arrange terms for her, and did his utmost to dissuade her from going to her original quarters. But Laura steadily refused these

offers, and announced her determination to go to the small hotel.

When she stepped from the train at Simla she was conscious of distinct pleasure and refreshment. The neat station, clean as a new pin, was crowded, but not inconveniently, by well-dressed and fresh-coloured English people waiting to welcome their friends. Everybody looked well, happy, and distinguished. There was no shabbiness anywhere, and very little evidence of mere swagger or pretentiousness. The women looked thoroughbred, the men had the appearance of power and authority.

Syston suggested that she should walk to the hotel, not wishing to lose her companionship in a rickshaw. He told his servant to see about the luggage, and they started off, in a procession of happy people, to climb the steep hill to the town. No carriages, save the Viceroy's and the Commander-in-Chief's, are allowed on these dangerous roads. One or two men rode past them, and presently rubber-tyred rickshaws, like huge Bath chairs, began to go by in a string, their barefoot coolies, three or four of them to each rickshaw, panting and gasping as they strained up the hill.

The sun was shining brilliantly, but the air was keen and searching. Some of the women were wrapped up in furs. Laura could see their breath, and noticed that many of the veils were speckled with moisture in front of the lips. She felt that her own cheeks were glowing. The cold was delicious to her.

She was disappointed by her first glance of the town. The zinc roofs gave it a shabby appearance, and the native houses, built of painted and blistered wood, suggested farm-buildings.

Her idea of Simla, gathered from certain romantic books, was quite different from this dusty and rather

miserable reality. She had expected a miniature Paris, or a little Monte Carlo, a beautiful and luxurious place devoted to wealth and pleasure. The broken road on which she walked, the dilapidated buildings on one side, and the dirty wooden rail guarding the khud, or precipice, on the other, and above everything else the corrugated iron roofs glaring so shamelessly in the sun — these things were a disillusion to her mind.

But after a steeper ascent, she found herself walking along a fine road, with handsome shops on either side, a stone church raising its clock tower to the sky, and some rather good-looking buildings in the distance. Rosy-faced and golden-haired English babies, their little legs in white woollen gaiters, went by on donkeys led by stately servants. Pleasant-looking boys in tweed suits rode to and fro on mettlesome ponies. A great fat bearded priest in a brown cassock rode past on a thoroughbred mare. There was a sense of movement and cheerfulness and brisk enjoyment. The women had complexions. There were English nurses in neat bonnets and print dresses. The perambulators gave a note of domestic happiness to the scene. All the shops had an English appearance.

The hotel to which she went stood on the side of a steep hill, darkened by the pines which surrounded it on every hand. It was a poor and rather desolate establishment, more like a second-rate boarding-house than a decent third-class hotel. Laura's heart sank at sight of it.

She bade Syston good-bye as soon as the woman who kept this place had come out to receive her. He said he would call in the evening to see how she was getting on, but she asked him not to come till the morning. "I am rather tired," she said, and thanked him for his kindness.

The interior was better than Laura expected. It was

quite ugly, but it was clean. The oil-cloth was polished, the sanitary papers had a glaze, there was not a speck of dust to be seen anywhere.

Left to herself, Laura turned down the bed-clothes and examined the sheets and mattress. They were without danger. Her luggage came, and she proceeded to unpack. After she had taken tea, which a servant brought to her with a low bow and a perpetual salaaming at the door before he withdrew, she wrote a letter to Basil. Then when she had bathed and changed her dress, she took a French novel from her luggage and sat down to read by the light of an oil-lamp.

There were not many guests in this hotel, for the cold weather had hardly come to an end, and Simla was not yet crowded. Laura made acquaintance, at a fairly good dinner, with two or three ladies and their husbands — people who were pleasant and kindly. She spent an hour with these people after dinner, and when they began to play bridge she took her book and withdrew for the night.

Soon after breakfast next day Philly Syston called, and invited her to go a walk with him. "You really must have someone to show you about," he said. "It's quite possible for a stranger to get lost and bewildered in Simla."

They spent the morning walking about in the streets, and, in spite of Laura's protestations, Syston bought her a bottle of scent, some books and magazines, and boxes of sweets. He wanted her to lunch with him at a restaurant, but she refused.

"You don't think it wrong, do you?" he asked.

"Not in the least; but — well, I am careful about things of that kind."

"But why?" He laughed and looked at her. "If it isn't wrong, why shouldn't you do it? I can promise

you that even in Simla there is no risk of scandal about such a thing as that."

She felt annoyed that he should hint at scandal regarding her. It was in bad taste. She resented the intimacy of his manner. But, what could she say, what could she do, to stand free of his interference in her life? He had been kind to her. He had done nothing against which anybody could have raised an objection. And yet she felt an unmistakable indelicacy in the easy friendliness of their relation to each other. He had kissed her; worse, she had kissed him. And she was now another man's wife.

"I want to be very quiet here," she said; "I have been ill, and have come here to get well again."

"Surely, then, a good luncheon is better for you than a miserable meal in that melancholy hotel of yours! But I won't press you. Only, I do hope you are not going to live a retired and secluded life in your hotel. Nature never intended you to play the nun. I want you to come a ride with me. I've got a horse that will carry you well. Unless you ride you'll see nothing of the country, nothing of the mountains."

"I don't ride," she answered.

"Won't you let me teach you?"

She shook her head.

"Mrs. Ashworth," he asked, "you don't resent my friendship, do you? You don't remember old scores against me?"

"Oh, not in the least," she made answer, and laughed nervously.

"We were only boy and girl then," he said, with a note of apology in his voice. "I was a silly fool, and I have blamed myself ever since. Perhaps you will understand what I mean, when I tell you that I have never married."

She pointed to a European in Indian dress, crossing the road in the distance, and asked who he was. "Oh, some mad fanatic," he answered impatiently; "probably a Salvationist or a missionary of some peculiar breed. We all eat Salvation Army marmalade up here. They've got a shop in the Mall. It's about the best thing they turn out, that marmalade. But tell me, Mrs. Ashworth — I really want to know — you don't wish to shun me because I was such an egregious ass eight or ten years ago?"

"I had quite forgotten that incident," she replied quickly and vexatiously. Then she laughed, and added, "I chiefly remember you as an athletic pianist. *Don't you hear the General say, Strike your tents and march away?* Do you still sing?"

"Sometimes."

She saw that he was hurt. "No, I don't want to shun you in the least, Captain Syston; but to put it rather crudely, I don't like and I don't imitate the married woman who is always about with other men."

"Isn't that a rather old-fashioned prejudice?"

"I respect it."

"Plenty of women who are in love with their husbands —"

"Oh, I have no doubt. It's only a matter of taste and temperament. I don't do it, just as I don't wear high heels in the street and smoke cigarettes in the coffee-room. Plenty of women who pass as good are given to those two things."

"I quite agree with you, a married woman should not be always about with Tom, Dick, and Harry. But surely, an old friend!"

She laughed. "In another ten years we shall be able to debate that aspect of the question!"

"Oh, I don't presume to consider myself a really old

friend; but, after all, we did know each other years ago; we had some most interesting walks and conversations; and there's no reason in the world that I can see why we should not now be the best of friends up here."

"None whatever. But the best of friends respect each other, and do nothing to injure each other's reputation."

"If your husband were here, I should ask you to come to luncheon or to dinner just the same."

"As he is not, I decline your invitation, just as I should decline any other man's. There is nothing personal, believe me, in my refusal."

At the door of her hotel, he asked, "When may I come and see you again? Will you come to tea this afternoon?"

She said that she was engaged, and asked him to come in a day or two's time. "I will come to-morrow morning," he said.

In the afternoon she was reading one of the books he had given her, sitting in a lounge chair beside her open window, when a servant entered and announced a visitor.

A woman, some forty years of age, plainly but handsomely dressed, whose face was at once beautiful and noble, followed the servant into the room, and approached Laura with a most winning smile, extending her hand, and saying in a voice that was very agreeable with honest kindness, "I hope you don't object to early visitors; I am Mrs. Langton, and I want to make your acquaintance." She carried some flowers in her other hand, which she offered to Laura, saying, "Can you find vases for them? I thought they might be nice for your rooms. It is not easy to get flowers in Simla."

Laura was charmed by this elegant woman, whose quiet grace and communicating charm reminded her of Anna Karénina. She fell in love instantly with the kind-

ness of her eyes, the sweetness of her voice, the indescribable expression of poetry in her carriage and movements.

"How did you know about me?" she asked after some time, almost entranced by this gracious woman.

"Oh, one hears of arrivals," Mrs. Langton answered. "I think it is a duty to call on one's countrywomen in a place like this, where it is so easy to be lonely." With a charming smile, she added, "And I find that duty very often becomes a delightful pleasure."

A servant entered the room just as the visitor had risen to say good-bye. He brought with him baskets of fruit and bouquets of flowers. "From the Captain Sahib," he said, and deposited his burden on a table.

Laura flushed, and for a moment Mrs. Langton regarded her curiously. "Your rooms will be quite beautiful," she said. "What lovely flowers!"

"I don't like them," said Laura, throwing off her sense of guiltiness. She looked Mrs. Langton in the eyes and said, "I don't like them at all."

The other smiled and nodded her head. "I understand. Never mind, however; like them for themselves; and come and see me as soon as you can."

CHAPTER VIII

GRACE LANGTON was the wife of a distinguished man in the Government of the Punjàb. Her house was in Chota Simla, on the side of the mountain, looking towards Bishop Cotton's School, with wonderful views across the valley. It was a large and comfortable house, furnished in the English style, and standing in a terraced rock garden which was full of rhododendrons and pine trees.

Laura was sitting in the drawing-room of this house, where a wood fire was burning, in the friendliest and most intimate conversation with her hostess. The two women had taken to each other from the first, and this intuition had led them without waste of time straight to an affectionate sympathy.

From the garden, chequered with light and shade, there came through the open windows the sound of children's voices, the creaking of a swing, and the roucou of pigeons. The room was fragrant with burning pine-wood.

"Of course it is a difficult thing," Mrs. Langton said, kneeling down on the hearth to rearrange the logs; "but I think a woman can always protect herself." Still kneeling there, she turned to Laura, who was looking at her and thinking what beautiful hair and what a fine neck she had. Grace continued—"It is distressing to be pestered by a man, to feel oneself for ever on one's guard, to be perpetually conscious of the risk of misunderstanding. That is an insufferable position for any sensitive woman. But however insidious the persecu-

tion, I feel quite sure that deliverance lies in her own hands."

She rose from her knees, and sat down in a low chair between the fire and the window.

Laura, who was sitting nearer to the fire and held a fan to shield her profile from the heat, felt that what her beautiful friend said was clearly true; she did not like to raise any objection. And yet she was conscious that the difficulty of putting her own particular relations with Syston on an innocent and innocuous footing was more subtle than Mrs. Langton perceived. She felt, however, that to say so would have been to place herself in a dubious position.

As if she read her thoughts, Grace Langton said: "Even when the woman is perfectly sure of herself, and where the man is most careful not to give offence, I think it is quite easy for a woman to avoid every possibility of a misunderstanding, if she makes up her mind to that end. The only danger lies in the woman's indetermination, in her hankering after amusement, in her uncertainty of direction. I have known one or two very nice women who have compromised themselves in this way. You know how it happens. A young married woman comes to Simla; she is not well-off and she knows few people; a man shows her attention, gets her invited out, lends her a pony, takes her to picnics, looks for her at parties, dances with her, gets even so far as to give her jewellery, and perhaps actually persuades her to accept a dress from him for some function at Viceregal Lodge. All this, gradually, and in the most innocent and friendly manner. She is delighted by the excitement he has brought into her solitude, carried off her feet by the luxury and pleasure which mark day after day of her new life — this new life so different from the dulness and monotony of a regimental existence

in the plains. And then one day she discovers that the man's kindness to her has a purpose. It is a great mistake to think that women become bad because they are bad. Most of them, I am sure, are snared and trapped into badness. They do not leap into evil; they slip into it — are there before they know it. Not only in Simla, which is really a very good place on the whole, and not only in India generally, which is the most trying country in the world for English women, but all over the world — women slip into ruin because they are not really determined towards goodness. I am sure that our protection lies in that — a strong and obvious determination towards goodness."

Laura felt that this phrase, *a determination towards goodness,* had a bracing effect on her mind and a clarifying effect on her moral perceptions. She was visited by a desire to be perfectly good. She was conscious of an aspiration towards a strong and lustrous virtue. She wanted to be visibly good. "Yes," she said quietly, "that is the real protection. To be determined towards goodness." Then, almost guiltily, she added, "And no woman is really good who provokes persecution of this kind."

"Well, no one perhaps is really good, my dear," said Grace Langton, very quietly, and smiling with a pleasant gentleness. "We must be careful how we speak about goodness. I would rather say that no woman absolutely devoted to virtue is in any danger of contamination. Many women who are genuinely trying to be good get themselves into tangles of trouble."

Laura leaned forward in her chair; resting her arms on her knees, the fan held in both her hands, twisting it round and round with her fingers, she said, "Women get into trouble, I think, because life is so monotonous for them. I mean, they are not determined towards

goodness, because they crave anything that will distract the tedium of their days. Goodness is not exciting. They find it little more than the dulness of doing nothing. And so they go here and there in search of distraction. They want to be amused; want to be taken out of themselves. Don't you think that is true? Of course for a woman who has children, and the cares of a family, there ought to be no risk whatever. But for the woman who has nothing to do — don't you think it is rather difficult for her to avoid the risk of temptation?"

"Well, to answer that question," said the other, turning her head for a moment to the window, "I should have to talk about religion." Two of the children ran past the window, playing at horses. "Everything, of course, is difficult in life, without religion," Grace went on, bringing her eyes round to Laura, which were still smiling after their glimpse of the children. "For myself, I think that virtue becomes simply a matter of temperament, without religion. I do not see, if religion is excluded, why any woman should be faithful to her husband, why any husband should be faithful to his wife. In fact, can we give any logical reason for the most elementary moralities, if religion is left out of count? Why should anyone be unselfish? Why should anyone struggle to master the lower nature? Why should there be effort to remove blemishes in character? You see what I mean; life appears to me to be utterly unintelligible without religion."

Laura did not feel in the least unwilling to talk about religion. She had not studied the question profoundly, but she had always been more or less interested in it. Mrs. Langton's manner made religion seem to her something real and sensible and important.

"I suppose everything in life comes back to religion," she admitted, in a tone which invited Grace to continue.

Grace nodded her head. "Everything," she answered. Then she added, rather earnestly, so that she looked suddenly older to Laura, "Take the question of marriage. Marriage is essential to the progress of humanity. You find no progress worth speaking about where women are not ennobled by marriage. I think one of the truest things ever said was that saying of an ancient philosopher: *Where women are honoured, the Divinities are complacent; where they are despised, it is useless to pray to God.* Everything seems to turn on the Mother — the rise and fall of empires, the wealth of nations, the fertility of invention, the physical vigour of the race. Well, without religion, isn't marriage an unreasonable, at any rate, a most hazardous idea? People who talk about the Marriage Problem are perfectly right; it is the greatest of all problems, without religion. Debate it without religion and you may come to any conclusion you like. It seems to me there is no possible justification for marriage, and absolutely no hope of the ideal marriage, without religion. Except in the very rarest cases, no man and woman can love each other with a perfectly thorough devotion throughout the long years and close intimacy of married life. Unless there is to be an exercise of spiritual qualities — forbearance, long-suffering, forgiveness, and above everything else a determination towards goodness, a sense and conviction of a spiritual destiny — how can people expect that any marriage should be pure and happy? Good people alone can be happy in marriage. All the trouble comes in cases where people are not good. The divorce courts exist for bad people. And why on earth should anyone be good, without religion?"

This incessant phrase "without religion" began to ring upon Laura's mind with a strange significance. She kept saying to herself, "I am living without religion.

Everything I do is done without religion. Everything I say is said without religion. Everything I think is thought without religion. How would it be with me, if everything I did was done with religion, everything I said, said with religion, everything I thought, thought with religion? I should be quite a different person. Life would be transformed for me. As it is, I refer nothing to religion. I live as if there were no such thing. Religion has no meaning for me."

It was in the nature of an awakening, this self-revelation that her whole life was without religion. And as she interested herself in this new thought she was conscious of the roucou of the pigeons outside, the dazzle of the sunset on the trunks of the pines, the buzzings of the air, and the crackle of the logs on her other side.

If she could be religious, she acknowledged, life would be well for her. But can one order religion to come at a moment's notice? Is it a thing one can "take up" suddenly, or at any moment that it occurs to one to do so? On the contrary, is it not one of those things to which a person is born? For herself, unconscious of any motion towards religion, she was distinctly aware of objections to the Christian religion.

"What you say seems to be perfectly true," she replied, passing her hand backwards and forwards over the fan as it lay in her lap. "The safest and the happiest people are the religious. And religion answers all problems. But some people are religious by nature; for others, religion is difficult to understand. Isn't that so?"

"You won't think me hatefully Pharisaical — will you," said Grace Langton —"when I say that I am perfectly sure — really and truly *perfectly* sure — that everyone can understand religion who wants to, genuinely wants to, understand it?"

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes, really."

"No intellectual, no temperamental difficulties?"

"None. No, really. None at all." There was a decisiveness in this utterance which almost offended Laura. But at the next moment she was once more in love with this charming woman. "I think the most truthful words," said Grace Langton, with a gentle smile of enthusiasm, "the most exquisite, the most penetrated by poetry, feeling, and the purest emotion, are those that sing in my mind with Handel's music, *If with all your heart you truly seek Him, ye shall surely find Him.* That seems to me absolutely true. It is a search. Something impels us to that search. *He has made us for Himself, and our heart is restless till it repose in Him.*" She paused for a moment, and then added softly, "The heart is restless till it repose in Him; but — *If with all your heart you truly seek Him, ye shall surely find Him.* That is my faith."

"Yes," said Laura, "that is the beginning of religion, an 'If!'" She smiled. "I am sure you are right, but I think the whole difficulty lies in that if. *If* with all your heart! Yes, but how few can do it?"

"Well, but surely all those who really want peace will strive to secure it. And the desire is the life, the striving is religion. I have never yet encountered among people naturally religious any who gave me so deep an impression of their faith as those I have met who came by religion after a great struggle and a difficult surrender. I don't think anyone really knows the depth and height of religion except those who have sought it through difficulty with all their hearts. And I am quite sure, even at the risk of appearing dogmatic, that no one who has sought with all the heart has ever failed to find Him."

At that moment some visitors passed before the windows on the way to the door. "We must talk about this

again," said Grace Langton; then she added, as Laura rose, "You mustn't go. You must stay to tea." She took her hand, and held it affectionately. With another hand, caressingly, she stroked and arranged Laura's wavy hair at the sides of the temples. "What pretty hair, and what a beautiful skin!" she said admiringly.

Laura smiled. "Shall we form a mutual admiration society?" she asked. "For I could sit and look at you all day!" They both laughed. "Nonsense: I am an old woman," replied Grace Langton, and she drew Laura close to her, and kissed her. "There, that's an old woman's privilege!" she said.

The visitors were a portly and perspiring mother and a lean, yellow, and simpering daughter. Soon after their arrival one of the children came into the room and Laura divided her attention between the portly mother and this delightful child, while Grace talked to the lean daughter. Laura found this old lady a pleasant if somewhat pompous and interrogatory person.

She was sitting with her back to the door when another visitor arrived. The child jumped away and ran to greet this new-comer. The old lady, looking over Laura's head, began to beam and sparkle. "Come," she said, with unaffected enthusiasm, "this *is* an honour." The tone implied that Laura had failed to interest her and that she was grateful for a diversion.

A man's voice, deep and agreeable, came to Laura's ears. She turned and looked over her shoulder.

In the middle of the room stood the man she had noticed and admired at the station when she was saying good-bye to Basil. Grace was talking to him, and he was holding the child with both hands as the little girl pressed against his legs and looked up to his face, saying, "You will come and see my rabbits, won't you?" The old lady had joined this group, and her daughter was

standing beside Grace, looking at the man with pleased eyes.

He seemed older to Laura. She saw with surprise, almost with disappointment, that his hair was iron-grey, and that there were many lines in his broad forehead and round the grey eyes under their black eyebrows.

He was a tall, deep-chested man, with a strong stubborn neck and rounded shoulders. The colour of his fine-drawn skin was a grey-brown — a deep grey as background with a varnish, as it were, of paler brown. The vivid intelligence and commanding vigour of the grey eyes, the strength of the firm lips, and the exceeding pleasantness of his voice were the three main impressions made upon Laura by this new arrival, whose unexpected presence in the room was something of a thrill and excitation to her senses.

Grace disengaged this new visitor from the others, and with a hand through his arm, as though he were a brother or a husband, brought him to Laura. For a moment it flashed across Laura's mind that this man who interested her so profoundly, and who, she felt sure, was interested in her, interested and curious about her — was Grace's husband, and she felt herself in the presence of a frightful danger. It was strange, but she felt guilty.

It must not be thought that her whole nature suffered a revolution. She did not cease to be a good and gentle woman stumbling bravely along the road of duty which unfortunately for her was unconsecrated by a spiritual direction. She remained the sweet girl who had so diligently ministered to her brother and sisters, the beautiful wife who struggled in a frightful environment to make her prison a home to her husband, the virtuous woman who had indignantly repulsed the assault of Reden. But, remaining the same woman, there was

quickened in her brain a new interest and a fresh enthusiasm. This new-comer vivified her intelligence and gave energy to the beatings of her heart. She was like one awakened from a long drowse to a great excitement.

"Mrs. Ashworth, let me introduce to you," said Grace, "a very great friend, Mr. Robert Grant." She regarded Laura's flushed face and bright eyes with a moment's surprise, but quickly turned to Grant, saying something about Laura's father and Cambridge, and about Laura's husband and Garampur. Then she stooped down, caught up her child, and said, "Mr. Grant will visit your new rabbit after tea. Run and call the other children, and tell them to wash hands and brush hair." She put the child down, pushed it towards the open window, and joined her other visitors. At that moment the servants appeared with tea.

"I met your father at the meeting of the British Association in 1904," said Grant, sitting beside Laura. "But as I spent most of my time in the Cavendish and Engineering Laboratories, I did not see very much of him. The Greeks and Romans don't mix with the Chemists and Engineers. Cambridge is a fine school, for 'the worship of detached ideas.' However, I did meet him — at a distance."

It struck Laura that perhaps he knew about Rose, and she felt unhappily ashamed. She did not pursue family history or ask questions about his friends in Cambridge.

"The whole world, as well as poor little Cambridge," she laughed, "is getting full of experts."

"Yes, that's true. It's rather a pity. You know the definition, *An expert is one who knows nothing else?* But they get things done all the same."

"One would certainly rather go to a dentist who

knew nothing else than to one who could play the violin and build airships!"

"Quite true." He looked at her with a smile. "The trouble arises, doesn't it, with the general public who are all nowadays synthetical philosophers?"

"*Tout le monde a raison,*" quoted Laura, conscious that she was pleasing him and a little elated with herself.

"Yes," he said, nodding his head, rather absently, "one no longer looks for truth in a well; its abode is the ballot-box. Every man is a grand juror in the search of genius for truth, and a Majority decides for us between right and wrong. It seems rather a clumsy arrangement, and yet it works better than the older plan. Perhaps there is a real safety in numbers." He looked away from her, and said to Mrs. Langton, who was pouring out tea, "Who do you think has just come to town, Grace? I met him at the club as I came away."

Laura felt nettled and uncomfortable. She had been conscious of strain in her conversation, of an unnatural effort to appear clever and amusing; and now it seemed that he had judged her as a silly woman, and had purposely asked this question to avoid further talk with her.

"Tell me?" said Grace, glancing up from the tea-cups.

He rose and went to the table. "Simpkins," he said, laughing. "He told me he has got a scheme that will revolutionise the sugar industry."

"Oh, he's always revolutionising something," she said, giving him a cup, which he carried to the old lady. Laura glanced at him. She tried to think that he was not good-looking, that his voice was not agreeable, that he did not interest her in the least.

"But things go round in much the same way in spite

of him," said Grant. "However, he looks splendid. He has taken to Sandow, deep-breathing, and a patent food. You ought to hear him on uric acid! He told me that you can't get a tiger in the United Provinces now for love or money. The L.G., he said, has ticketed every one of them, *This animal is the private property of His Honour.* Fellows are selling their rifles and buying skipping-ropes and grip dumb-bells. There's nothing else to do."

"Why doesn't he marry?" demanded the old lady, rather indignantly.

Everybody laughed at this blunt question.

"Do you regard marriage as one of the sports?" asked Grant.

Laura noticed that his eyebrows lifted and twitched a little when he smiled.

"The best of them," answered the old lady, laughing so that her fat shook. "Another lump of sugar," she said, extending her cup.

Soon after the mother and daughter had gone, Laura rose to take her departure.

"Let me go and see the new rabbit," said Grant, getting up from his chair; "and then, if she will allow me, I will walk back to Simla with Mrs. Ashworth."

He went off to find the children, and when he was well out of hearing, Grace said to Laura, "That is one of the great men of India. I dare say you have heard all about him."

Laura shook her head. "No; I don't think so."

"I shall have to talk to Garampur!" laughed Grace. Then she added, seriously, "He is really a remarkable man. He is a Civil Engineer, and has done most marvellous work with canals. Millions of people, literally millions, are living, in a prosperity they never knew before, on land that was absolute desert before he

watered it from a wasting river. I should think he knows as much about the Indians as any man in the country. You must get him to talk about the peasants. My husband says that until Robert Grant writes a book on Modern India no one in England will understand the country. But I don't think he will ever write a book. He is one of the most modest men alive, and is perfectly content with his day's work, only regretting the old nomadic life among the peasants."

"Is he married?" Laura asked, affecting a merely casual interest in her question.

Grace shook her head.

Two of the children came clattering into the room, followed by Robert Grant and the little girl who owned the new rabbit.

CHAPTER IX

Did he like her? Did he care for her?

These questions Laura asked herself day and night. They were the central occupation of her thoughts. Without any misgiving she found that they formed the supreme interest of her existence. Robert Grant had made upon her mind one of those profound impressions of personality which are quick to generate in receptive minds an obsession and an occupation which is almost like a passion.

She had ceased to think about the grey in his hair and the lines around his eyes. There was nothing in him which disappointed her. He was neither old nor young to her. She could not have said whether she found more pleasure in looking into his eyes or listening to his voice. She never thought of him as a handsome or a plain man. There was nothing photographic in this devotion of her heart. It was his nature to which she kneeled. Something obvious and well defined in his nature — nothing that was in any way remote, occult, or subtle — created in her heart an admiration that strained and longed to become love. She worshipped what a great many other people admired in him — the genuine ring of an honest mind, the quiet vigour of a studied and controlled strength, the tolerance and kindness and humanity of a resolute and cheerful spirit.

She said to herself, "I cannot help it. He is the highest and best type of man I have ever met. It may be wrong from a social point of view, but it is inevitable from the point of view of nature. We love what we

admire. How can I help admiring what my whole being assures me is admirable? It is all very well for people to talk. Love is a law of the universe. I don't deliberately and wickedly love him. I simply feel myself carried towards him by the law of affinities, by the force of attraction. What are those lines of Shelley? *All things by a law divine, in one another's being mingle.* We can't help ourselves. It is absurd to suppose that little, artificial, human barriers can stem these floods of natural feeling. I love him: I must love him—whether it is wrong and whether it is hopeless. I shall be strong; I shall be honourable; I shall do nothing base or mean; but I shall let my thoughts go to him and in my heart I shall adore him. But does he care for me? He is interested. He likes being with me. But does he really care, really, really care for me?"

It was no easy matter to decide that question. Grant did not often call at her hotel, but he always found his way to her side at every party she attended. He never asked her to go out alone with him, yet they often encountered each other in the streets, and he would walk with her. It was quite clear to Laura that he was not running after her; but then, it was almost as clear that the sight of her gave him pleasure and that he liked to be with her.

It was not only the man himself, in those apparently chance encounters, who affected her so deeply. She heard him talked about by other people. There were many stories of his skill, his former romantic life in lonely villages, his knowledge of the Indians, his power with the Government. Philly Syston, not realising that he was a rival, told Laura that Robert Grant was one of the greatest men in India and one of the finest fellows in the world. So that from all sides there came to her a deepening of the impression he had made upon

her, and she thought about him, and considered him in the dangerous light of a hero.

Conversation was easy and unrestrained between them. They were fond of reading; their sympathies were very much the same; and both were good listeners. He liked to hear Laura express her opinions about life, which she now did freely but modestly, without any foolish effort to be epigrammatic or paradoxical; and she liked to hear him talk about his strange and romantic experiences among the Indians in a series of little narratives which she found very charming and thoughtful.

He had never once suggested even in the most elusive way that he admired Laura and cared for her. Nevertheless, remembering how their eyes had met at the station, how he had looked at her as she left the refreshment room at Barogh, and how he came to her side whenever they were at the same place together, she was persuaded to think that he, too, was conscious of affinity and attraction. She found this quiet and unforceful love-making of the strong man very enchanting.

Every now and then that reiterated phrase of Grace Langton's, *without religion,* recurred to her mind, and set her thinking for a few minutes in a troubled and almost a repentant manner. But she felt herself to be impatient of spiritual things. She brushed these thoughts aside. She fought against their interference with her life. The phrase became an irritation. She even began to think of Grace as a fanatic.

The thought of her husband was only an occasional disturbance to the rapture in which she now lived from day to day. "If he were here, if it pained him, and he asked me to," she said to herself, "I would give up seeing the man I cannot help loving. But he is not

here, and I do not hurt his feelings. Besides, there is no harm in what I do. A woman doesn't become a slave when she marries. I have a perfect right to see any man I like. It is all nonsense to think that a woman is to do without friends directly she gets married."

One reflection really did trouble her. She found that she was avoiding Grace Langton. Her conscience told her every time she did meet this gentle sweet-faced woman that something was amiss in her life, something that made her feel guilty and shameful. So she refrained from going to Grace's house as often as she could. And this troubled her peace. It made her irritable.

As for Philly Syston, he gradually ceased to be an annoyance. One night at a reception by the Commander-in-Chief he had passed her with a girl on his arm, as she sat with Robert Grant on a palm-shaded divan leading out of the great drawing-room. He had turned deliberately and looked at her with a smile over the girl's bright hair and gleaming shoulders. The smile said to Laura, "Now I understand; but why didn't you tell me, instead of pretending to be virtuous?"

She felt that she hated him.

CHAPTER X

"I WANT you to give me a treat," Laura said to Grant one day. They had encountered at the library.

He smiled and looked at her. "What is that?"

"I want you to take me to Mashobra."

"To make up a party?"

She shook her head. "Why shouldn't we go alone?"

"No reason in the world."

"When shall we go?"

"When you like."

"This afternoon?"

"Very well. I'll make arrangements. You had better go by rickshaw. It's too far to walk in the heat. I'll ride as escort."

In the afternoon a rickshaw with four jhampanis came to Laura's hotel. She set out as if she were paying a call.

Without a sound the four jhampanis, two in front and two behind, trotted slowly down the steep hill, swung on to the road which leads to Chota Simla, and set off at a fine pace down the easy gradient under the deodars.

Laura, who always found a delightful excitation in these Simla rickshaws, looked for Grant at every turn and curve in the beautiful road with a happy and contented smile: she was only mildly disappointed at not seeing him. It pleased her to think that perhaps he had gone on ahead to avoid scandal. There was in this expedition the same element of danger which made a swift run in the rickshaw so exciting to her senses.

She felt that this excursion was to settle the great question in her heart, Did he love her?

She passed Grace's house, and held her sunshade so as not to be seen, smiling as the sun came full in her face. The road narrowed, and ascended. The men began to walk, their pantings audible in the still air. She felt the sun blazing on the leather upholstery of the rickshaw.

She saw groups of Kashmiris standing on the edge of the precipice to let her go by. These tall, lean men, small-headed, long-necked, and broad-shouldered, stooping under huge balks of timber, with a chocolate-coloured skull cap at the back of the shaven head and their voluminous nether garments smothered in dust, always brought to her mind a picture of Simon Cyrene staggering under the cross, and filled her with pity. But to-day it gave her a sense of pleasure that they should be sweating there in the sun, under those massive burdens, while she went easily forward to pleasure on soft wheels and yielding springs. She had no pity in her heart, nothing but joy, hope, and excitement.

A string of thick-set and dwarf-like Tibetan women came climbing up the khud with immense stones from the quarries corded on their necks and shoulders. Their numerous braids of black hair, their coffee-coloured flat faces whose fine breadth between the eyes was only comical, their absurd little velvet jackets and baggy trousers, the long stick grasped in the tiny right hand, the pleasant smile in their almond-shaped eyes as they made the effort to look up from under their tremendous loads — these things seen by Laura in a glance, pleased her, amused her, contributed in some way to the exultation of her feelings.

Farther on, at another bend in the everlasting curves of this enchanting road through the mountains, the rick-

shaw had to stop that a cavalcade of richly harnessed mules might go by, handsome mules with panniers full of stones, and bells ringing from their necks, the shouts and thwackings of the muleteers coming to Laura through a cloud of choking dust. She put her handkerchief to her mouth and closed her eyes.

"Chalo!" cried one of the jhampanis at the back, pushing the rickshaw forward, and with that little jump which is so characteristic, the two men in front, whose shoulders had been heaving like spent runners a moment ago, set straight off at a pleasant easy trot. It delighted Laura to see every now and then how they gave a little leap to the bar at the end of the pole, as if they were children playing at horses.

Still no sign of Grant.

The rickshaw was ascending a sharp hill, where no trees afforded shade from the sun, when the sound of a horse trotting just behind her caused Laura's heart to beat with sudden pleasure. She did not turn round. One of the men in front looked back over his shoulder, and she saw that his forehead was a-shine with perspiration. "Ahista!" he panted under his breath. The rickshaw drew away to the left, and a moment afterwards the tossing head and arched neck of a chestnut horse drew alongside, on Laura's right.

She shifted her sunshade and looked up with a pleased smile.

He touched the brim of his topi with a small cane in his right hand, and answered her smile. "No need," he said, "to ask you if you have enjoyed your drive."

"Do I look so happy?" She noticed how pleased he looked, and how his eyebrows lifted and twitched as he smiled at her.

He nodded.

"It has been delicious," she said, and regarded his horse.

The side of the neck was coated with sweat, the bit was covered with foam, the flanks and legs were streaming. Yet the horse appeared to be otherwise fresh, walking gamely, the ears moving incessantly, the eyes rolling, the head tossing with energy.

"Have you ridden hard?" she asked.

"No; it's the sun." He leaned forward and patted the mane of his horse just beside the cow-lick on its neck. "A little perspiration doesn't affect him. He's quite ready to fly this hill."

At the top of the ascent, he said, "I'll ride on and order tea; shall I? It will be nice to have it in the open, don't you think?"

"Oh, much nicer," she replied, and smiled and nodded to him as he rode on ahead of her.

The two men in front talked together of the Sahib and the horse. "Chalo!" cried a voice behind, and off went the rickshaw. Laura watched the dwindling figure of the horseman with bright eyes. "Shabash! shabash!" said the voice at her back, as the vehicle swung up the hill.

Grant was not waiting to receive her when she arrived at their destination. She got out of the rickshaw and moved to the side of the hill. A superb Indian attracted her attention. He was standing on a rock that seemed to be only a pedestal for his figure, like a statue, looking across the valley to the mountain peaks in the far distance whose snow was smoking in the blinding dazzle of the sun. He was dressed in a long dull claret cloak, with a black hood over his head, and a scarf of shining white linen hanging from one of his shoulders. He held a staff in his right hand, and leaned against it as he gazed across the valley. The large dark eyes, the

Roman nose, the moustache and beard, and the expression in his face of august sorrow and infinite tenderness, reminded her of pictures of Christ. She felt unhappy, and moved in another direction, looking for Grant.

He came to her through the trees. "I've found the most delightful place on the whole hill for you," he said, rather proudly. "And tea will be there in a minute."

They walked together for a moment or two without speaking.

"Well," he asked presently, "are you satisfied with Mashobra?"

"Yes, it's delightful. I like everything here. It's the only part of India I do like. As for Garampur — I hate it."

He smiled. "Is the same padre there — what's his name?"

"Candy Sahib?"

"Ah, yes; that's the man. An appalling person!" He laughed abruptly.

"Oh, of course; now I remember!" cried Laura. "I thought I had heard about you before. Mrs. Toynbee or somebody told me. You snubbed the padre one day at the club, in the cardroom; didn't you?"

"Did I?" he asked. "If so, I'm sorry." He turned to one side. "Now, here we are," he exclaimed, cheerfully. "In the words of the Walrus and the Carpenter, *Do you admire the view?* Isn't it rather fine? Look, I've got a rug for you. You can lie there, take your tea and watch the sunset without spoiling your dress. All very thoughtful of me." He pulled an old pair of field-glasses out of his pocket, and gave them to her. She looked up at him as she took them. Their eyes met.

"How sweet of you," she said, blushing, and laughed.

When they had finished their tea, they watched the sun's descent towards the summits of the mountains, and talked in rather low voices of the beauty of the colouring which burned for long miles along his sloping course, trailing there like the flaming dust and smoking fires of chariot wheels. The entire ridge of hills appeared to vibrate with the intensity of its edge of fire. The descending sides of this immense bastion were the deepest purple, almost black, and had the soft density of a midst. The valley, with its trees and fields and scattered houses, was in twilight. The opposite hills were still glowing with the day's glory, every tree clearly discernible, the walls and roofs and windows of houses distinct as daybreak. Above the ridge of fire along the western mountains the sky was a deep orange; above again it was a melting saffron; above again it merged into a shimmering primrose; and then, fading to a pale green it gradually became the soft deep blue of infinity, with the ghost of a moon swimming between earth and heaven.

An eagle hung above the valley as if suspended from the moon. The tinkling of a goat's bell came to them from below, up the side of the hill on which they were lying. Behind them they could hear an Indian singing in the distance of the trees.

"This is one of those evenings which we never forget," Laura said softly, without looking at him.

"It is well to have pleasant souvenirs," he answered.

"But the French say that we cannot choose our memories."

"No; but we can do something to make them."

"I wonder."

"Are you such a fatalist?" he asked.

She thought for a moment. "I don't know. I think perhaps I am."

He smiled. "Organisation, then, becomes a dangerous thing. We had better do nothing."

"Perhaps all the trouble in life comes from that organisation. No; I don't mean quite that. But society organising itself against nature seems rather a perilous undertaking. It might be better with the world (I don't know) if humanity were less artificial. What do you think? Don't we make most of our own perplexities by our mutiny against nature?"

"I rather approve of somebody's dictum that man begins where nature leaves off. Is it not something of a mis-statement of the facts to say that man organises himself *against* nature? I think it is an organisation out of and away from nature, to something higher."

Laura reflected, and made answer, rather slowly: "Of course a man who is going to do anything in life cannot be a fatalist; that is impossible. But for a woman it is different. Woman is such a slave. Her whole life is a long submission. It is a little tempting to vary the monotony of submitting to man by an occasional submission to destiny! I like to feel that I am being moved by invisible forces. It's pleasanter than the sensation of being shackled by society. Have you ever felt that?—the deliciousness of going with the tide, of surrendering the will, of not caring what happens? It's better than rushing down a steep hill and swinging round a sharp corner in a rickshaw!"

He studied her with his grey eyes, smiling. He was lying on his side, at a distance of two or three feet from her, one hand supporting his head, the other resting on the shabby field-glasses which stood on the rug. Laura was sitting with her legs bent away from her, the feet

crossed, one hand in her lap, the other flat on the ground at the end of a rigid arm which kept her upright.

Her small eyes, with their dark lashes, and their trick of compressing the lids, were shining in the afterglow of the sun, which illumined her fair skin and tinged it with a soft lustre. The small mouth shone like a ripe cherry. The waves of her brown hair sparkled with glints of gold against the dead whiteness of her neck. There was the suggestion of a dimple beside her lips, which were parted in a smile of reverie. Grant observed the rise and fall of her breast which told of excitement behind her words.

"In Garampur—" he began slowly.

She turned her head quickly and looked at him, all the reverie gone from her lips. "Don't speak of that odious place," she said almost eagerly. Then she smiled, looked away, and said in a softer voice, "Not now. Another time. This is so beautiful."

After a moment, she asked him, "Mrs. Langton is a great friend of yours, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"You admire her?"

"Very much."

"Is she your ideal type of woman? You don't mind my asking you these questions?" she said impulsively, turning her head to look at him. "I only want to know, like the Confession Album," she laughed, looking away again, "what qualities you most admire in a woman."

"I admire her very much; yes. Don't you?"

"Oh, a woman's opinion isn't worth having. It's a different standpoint."

"She is a beautiful woman," he said, "and she is a good woman."

"There are different types of beauty and different types of goodness. Is her goodness the goodness you most admire in a woman?"

"How would you define her goodness?"

"Well, she is a loving wife, a devoted mother, and a religious woman."

"That is certainly what I should like my own wife to be."

"Are you religious?"

"Not perhaps in quite the same way as Grace Langton."

"You don't believe all that she believes?"

"Not quite all, I expect."

"What is religion — tell me."

"Well," he answered, "to put it simply, religion is morality in earnest. It's just the sense that there is a struggle between the best of one and the worst of one, and that the struggle has a meaning."

"I must ask you this question."

He laughed. "Fire away!"

She turned and looked at him, smiling. "You provoke my curiosity, you know."

"Do I?" he asked, with a little movement of his eyebrows. "I am proud; but I wonder why?"

"You are an interesting man."

"Well, now, what is the terrible question?"

She glanced down. "About the struggle you mentioned between the best and the worst of one."

"Well?"

"Is it," she stole a look at him, "a real struggle with you?"

He nodded his head. "Very real sometimes, I assure you."

She watched him with a frank curiosity, an almost

devouring interest. He could see that his answer had pleased her. "I'm so glad," she said softly, and once more looked away from him.

"And you," he said quietly—"it's my turn now, you know!—do you have to struggle?"

"All the time," she answered.

"Poor little woman!"

She looked quickly at him, gratitude and delight in her eyes. She was extraordinarily beautiful at that moment. "You understand. I knew you would," she said softly.

"It's not difficult to understand," he replied quietly.

She turned away her head.

"I should like you to tell me some day," he went on, "about your life in Garampur, about everything. Will you do that?"

"I can tell you now."

"It is getting late. I am afraid you may take cold."

"In one word."

"I think I can guess it, then."

"What?"

"Monotony."

"That was the very word in my mind. How many letters has it got?" She counted with her fingers on her lap, spelling the word aloud. "Eight," she said, looking at him. "That's my life. The whole of it. Eight little letters."

"You beat me by three," he said, getting up rather quickly. "Come; we really must go. It's dangerous for you to sit here." He put the field-glasses into his pocket and stooped down to give her his hand.

As she got upon her feet, standing close to him, she asked, "What is your life? Tell me."

He regarded her tenderly, in silence. Then he smiled,

drew a little apart from her, and bent down to pick up her sunshade.

"Well, it's a word of five letters," he said, giving her the sunshade, meeting her eyes for a moment, and then looking away. "Can you guess?" he asked, facing round to walk back to the hotel.

A servant came out from the trees and approached to fetch the rug.

"No; tell me," she said.

He glanced at her, and smiling as if with an apology for being autobiographical, gave her the answer:

"Alone."

CHAPTER XI

THROUGH the moonlight, Laura drove back to her hotel with a most delicious sense of joy pervading her whole being. She felt that Grant undoubtedly loved her; she was quite certain that in a few days their relations would be those of the closest intimacy. These thoughts were such a rapture to her heart that she never once considered the morality of her conduct. She who had been so sure of herself in Garampur, so virtuously scornful of Reden's melodrama, so steadfast against Philly Syston's insidious strategy, was now, without a misgiving or a shame of any kind, enraptured at the thought of a man's love for her.

It is difficult at any time to be reflective and philosophical in a Simla rickshaw; but particularly is this the case when the sun has gone down, when the swift twilight has faded, and when the moon and stars look tenderly upon the snow, the rocks, the dark deodars, and the green valleys seven thousand feet below the edge of the precipice. The breathing of the white-clad jhampanis, and the padding of their feet, are the only sounds that come to the reclining traveller. The rubber-tyred wheels purr softly through the yellow dust, the springs give easily to the dips in the road, and in every downward rush, every flashing sweep round a corner, and every gallant shoot of a hill, there is so much exhilaration, so much laughing recklessness, so much careless ravishment, that the brain is wholly unable to think with a calm and measured reflection.

At one moment Laura was rushing through the cold air in an open country where scarcely a single tree was discernible, and where the yellow rocks and green scrub were bathed in light as clear as day; at the next she was spinning through the darkness of thick deodars, an immense wall of rock rising black and eternal on her right, the precipice descending sheer and terrible on her left. At one moment the little oil-lamp on the bar of the pole between the two jhampanis in front, was scarcely visible; at the next it threw a patch of jerking light full on the road which burrowed through a darkness as heavy and impenetrable as the blackness of a tunnel. Now and again she caught sight of white-robed figures on the road; now and again saw a light burning in a window; now and again heard from the far distance the deep cry of a barking deer. But these things made no appeal to her attention or distracted the flowing delight of her reverie. She was conscious only of two things — flight through the cold air and love at her heart.

These feelings continued when she had left the rickshaw, and even accompanied her consciousness to bed. As she lay waiting for sleep, she felt herself rushing through the air on noiseless wheels; and when she slept it was to dream of swift and effortless flight through the blue of heaven.

For two or three days she saw nothing of Robert Grant, and in consequence found herself the prey of alarming fears. Had she driven him away from Simla? Was he purposely avoiding her? She went over their conversation at Mashobra a hundred times, and each time blamed herself more sharply and with ever-increasing shame for those hinting questions she had addressed to him. Had she not been a merely vulgar coquette? How trivial and ogling and blushing, those

questions! A flirt, a common flirt! She felt herself covered with the shame of immodesty. Better, far better,— yes, a thousand times less base and evil — to have declared with solemn earnestness and a surrender of all manœuvring, her worthy love for him, her overwhelming virtuous love for this great man whom she felt to be so good and noble.

But at her first reception at the Viceregal Lodge she suddenly encountered the gaze of Grant, and in a few moments he came to her side. She had gone to this reception with none of the excitement of a young girl, and none of the hunger of a place hunter. She had gone simply in the hope of meeting Grant. If she had been vexed by her poor finery, if she had taken inordinate pains with her hair, if she had spent more money than she could afford on gloves and flowers, it was solely for him. And so she had passed through the line of little knock-kneed, thin-necked chaprassis in their rather shabby scarlet, amused by the descriptions she had read in novels of Oriental grandeur, and had made her bow to the Viceroy and his wife without any fluttering of the heart or any excitement in her eyes, and then had passed to a group of her friends half-way up the handsome apartment, thinking only of Grant. Grace Langton was sitting on the opposite side of the room, but Laura did not go to her, and averted her eyes as soon as she had discovered her whereabouts. She had but one occupation: to wait for Grant. The music that was being played suggested love of the character she had in her heart.

When he came to her she said at once, and without the least tinge of coquetry, "I have missed you."

"Shall we go to the other end of the room?" he answered, and walked at her side through the crowding people. Laura cast a swift glance over her shoulder

and saw without appearing to see that Grace Langton was watching her.

She had hoped, in her expectations of this interview, to be honest and bold in her affirmation of love; but now, with the man at her side, it seemed to her that elusive words and tempting glances were less indelicate and more hopeful of victory. She began to think hastily, like an actress who has forgotten her part, how she should conduct this colloquy. And the music seemed to become the music of intrigue and scheming passion.

He said to her when they were out of the press of people, "I have rather blamed myself for something I said to you at Mashobra."

"I cannot think what it can be," she answered with a smile; and then, as he began to speak, she interrupted him and said in a low voice, looking away from him, "And I remember everything you said."

He glanced at her quickly. They walked on a few paces, and then seated themselves on a sofa against the wall. "If you were a judicious critic," he said, smiling, "you would blame me for at least one word. I described my life as being *alone*. That was theatrical. I have shuddered over it again and again. If the sun had not burned and withered my face you would see that I am even now blushing like a guilty schoolboy."

She kept silence for a moment. Then, opening her fan, and glancing down at it, she asked him a question. "And are you not alone?"

"Even if so, I should not have said so. The declaration would have gone well to soft music on the stage of a transpontine theatre; I admit that! But it was horrid in the mountains; horrid in India. Oh, yes; a perfectly odious piece of melodrama."

"But if you are lonely, why shouldn't you tell me so?"

He laughed. "I can only answer that it is not *the thing*. When I consider what a man in the Khyber Rifles would think of such a piece of behaviour, I am covered with shame."

"Nevertheless, it is natural for a man to confide in a woman, if he can trust her."

He turned round, smiling, and denied the suggestion. It came to Laura that his smile, the carelessness of his attitude, and the tone of his voice were all adopted to avoid any unpleasant whispering among the other guests. He was like a father talking to a daughter, or an elderly man amusing himself by an argument with a child.

"I don't agree with that!" he answered. "No! that is how trouble comes. It is the chief heresy of our age. A man should never be in such an attitude to a woman as to confide in her, unless she be his wife. His attitude should always be knightly and chivalrous. It is his business to protect and safeguard a woman; not to sap the foundation of her security and happiness. If men were taught to be chivalrous towards women, there would be a great deal less misery in the world. To be chivalrous towards all women is the first article of our manhood. It is a bad characteristic of our age — that cunning and almost whining appeal to a woman's sympathy."

"Then you would have no friendship between man and woman?"

"Why not?"

"Can there be real friendship without complete confidence?"

"Can there be worthy friendship without admiration?" he rejoined.

"I don't understand."

"A woman ought surely to give her friendship only

with her admiration; and how can a woman admire a man who is not strong and self-secure, a man who comes whining to her for sympathy like a play-actor?"

"Oh, you don't understand women!"

"Of course in the heart of every woman there is a mother."

"But, don't you see," she asked eagerly, smiling in the certainty of her sound reason, "that a woman doesn't admire men in categories? There are no pigeonholes in a woman's heart. She admires a man because he is what he is in a way that defies analysis. It is the mystery of what people call personality."

"I see."

"And when a woman gives admiration she seeks confidence; and it does not seem to her that the man is weak who gives her his confidence; it is enough for her that she is trusted. The stronger the man the more entrancing his confidence."

"Well, then, on another ground. That tragic word *Alone* was something of a fib. I have my work. I have a multitude of friends. There are scores of men in India who really are alone, tragically alone; but I am not one of those."

"I thought you were speaking of your heart."

Without noticing this interruption he continued, "My work takes me far away from towns and cantonments; and I am for ever coming upon Englishmen who really do live alone — alone in some remote and desolate village — without even a single educated Indian for companionship. I often think that the real romance of our government of India is the lives of these men. These solitary Englishmen — how seldom people think about them! There they are, young men of brilliant education, representing the Pax Britannica, standing for civilisation and justice, and making for some kind of

European progress, among the most ignorant, superstitious, and stupid peasantry of India. No one to care for them; no one with whom they can talk as equals. And they seldom complain. They live moral and upright lives. They help the poor, befriend the miserable, and withstand the tyrant. And they are entirely alone. They do not marry because they feel that such a life would be hard on a woman. They live absolutely alone."

She resented this speech. "But people can be much more alone in crowds," she said, closing her fan abruptly and half turning to him.

"It is wiser," he replied, "to regard that idea as an illusion."

"That is impossible. Everyone is alone who has not found the one friend."

"I am a great believer," he answered lightly, "in auto-suggestion. I think we can persuade ourselves of anything. The chief business in life is to make good suggestions to oneself. Have you ever studied Christian Science? In the midst of much metaphysical confusion they have got hold of a profound truth. It is really worth while to study that matter of auto-suggestion. It throws a light on the mystery of consciousness."

"I don't think I could read a book on Christian Science, and I don't think I could understand it, even if you explained it, with this band playing and all these people parading about. But will you tell me about it one day, in the open country? I have never yet been up Jacko. My time is getting short here. Will you take me one day, and tell me as we go?"

"Yes, with pleasure; but are you going down soon?"

"I must."

"You are really better now?"

"I am frightfully unhappy."

After a moment, in which it seemed to her she was waiting for judgment, he asked in a tone that was almost conversational, almost natural—"You do not like Garampur?"

It was like a rebuff.

She tried to laugh. "No; I don't like it," she said; adding with a touch of spitefulness, "I hate it."

"There are certainly better stations."

"It is odious."

"All the same—"

"No, there are neither compensations nor consolations. It is odious; and everything there, my life included, is odious also. I simply hate the place. But what is the use of complaining? One must go on. If you were not so averse from melodrama, I should be inclined to say, *The die is cast;* or something equally forlorn and depressing."

"I am certain you have got courage."

"I am not at all sure of that."

"Yes; you have courage."

"What makes you think so?"

"Nothing in your face, but something in your voice."

She thought for a moment. "If I had courage," she said slowly, "real courage, the only courage that counts, I should rebel."

"Against what?"

"My life; or rather, what the world has done to my life."

"Are you so very unhappy?" he asked in a lower voice.

"I cannot count a single blessing."

"Really, is that true?"

"Quite true."

"Perhaps the blessing is to come."

She wanted to answer, "It has come; but I may not

take it." Instead, she shook her head and replied, "I have forgotten how to hope."

"Oh, no. Not at your age. You must hope. Life has given you the blessings of beauty and health; further into your life I must not peer; but I am quite certain other blessings will come."

Grace Langton was approaching on the arm of an Assistant-Commissioner who had been extremely kind to Laura.

"You will take me up Jacko, won't you?" she asked eagerly and in a low voice. "I want to ask you something. Will you come for me? To-morrow?"

"To-morrow at three o'clock," he answered.

CHAPTER XII

On the following day Grant called at the hotel, and found Laura waiting for him on the verandah. She felt that this day would take the decision of her life. She was aware of the edge of crisis.

They set out at once, and, talking of anything but the subject so close to their hearts, were soon climbing the steep and broken bridle-track which leads through the deodars to the fakir's hut on the top of Jacko — or Jakkho, as some people prefer to spell it.

A few patches of snow still lay hard and sparkling under the darkest trees, and every now and then in a shadowed curve of their way a deep drift of spongy shining snow, marked at the edges by the claws of birds, reached half-way up the bank. But the hot sun was burning redly through the feathery branches of the deodars. The bushes on either side were bright with young green. The whole woodland was filled with summer scents, and the air had that wonderful stillness and deep warmth which comes to England in a fine July.

Every now and then, pausing in this stiff climb, they looked back and caught picturesque glimpses of Simla far below them — corrugated roofs shining like silver in the glare, the wooden sides of houses plastered with advertisements, roads swerving, dipping down, and ascending, and the tall brown tower of the church standing with sharp outline against the blue haze, the symbol of an alien civilisation and an alien God.

When they were in sight of the crest of the hill a troop of monkeys came charging towards them, swinging down from trees, and leaping over bushes, some

fighting as they ran, and all chattering at the tops of their voices. Laura recoiled from their bright and threatening eyes, terrified by their numbers, and unaware of the reason for this sudden onslaught.

"Don't beat them off!" Grant said, with a laugh, as Laura opened her parasol and prepared to receive cavalry with that elegant weapon. He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a bag of parched grain.

Some of the monkeys came quite close for this food, and all of them were near enough to keep Laura in a state of anxiety.

"I don't like them," she said, laughing. "I wish they'd go away."

"It isn't safe to drive them," he replied: "but they are really quite harmless, if one treats them decently. There was once a frightful tragedy here," he went on, scattering the grain, which smelled pleasantly in the hot air. "A lady was riding up Jacko one day, with her dog; the monkeys attacked the dog, and frightened the horse. It reared up, sprang to one side, and went clean over the khud. Both were killed — and the woman was very young, very beautiful, and very attractive."

They continued their walk, the numerous monkeys following on either side. Grant gave Laura some of the parched grain to taste, and she nibbled it, and liked it, and asked for more.

She was thinking to herself, "What will come of this journey? How many men and women have come here and sat among these trees and tasted deeply of enchanted wine? It is the very place for romance. The atmosphere seems to hold the beatings of women's hearts. One breathes love. I am glad it is here that we have come. We are absolutely alone. We both love each other. It is sure to happen that we shall say so.

And after that? After that?" She let her thoughts stop there. "Nothing matters," she told herself; "love is the lord of our hearts and the master of our lives."

At the top of Jacko, the venerable fakir who lives there in a hut, and has a temple and disciples in his charge, rose from a bench and greeted them with a somewhat diffident and rather clumsy courtesy. He was wearing a soiled and shabby cap of scarlet; his forehead and swollen cheeks were dusted with yellow powder; his robes were a dirty white. In the old man's sunken eyes there was a touch of benignity, but the face was too full and the moustache and beard something too well kempt for an anchorite. He looked like a decent shepherd of seventy or seventy-five years of age.

Grant greeted him in Hindustani, and shook hands with the old man, presenting Laura. The fakir called one of his disciples, and began to feed the monkeys, like a keeper in zoological gardens. Then, turning about, he uttered a loud cry two or three times, and in a minute an immense monkey appeared, charging into the midst of the others like a huge boarhound, and scattering them right and left.

"This is the Rajah Monkey," explained Grant as the great brute seized a smaller creature in its teeth, shook it furiously, and threw it, screaming and crying, on one side. "That big one over there is the Ranee. They all know the fakir, and answer when he calls them. Some people think the old fellow is a wizard, others that he is a most holy man, and others that he is nothing more than a receiver of stolen property! For myself, I think he is man in a prehistoric state; a child of the forest with complete faith in certain gods, and a more or less honest desire for annihilation. He will want you to peep into his temple; it is not worth seeing,

but look in; he will then present you with sweetmeats; accept them, but do not eat them!"

When they had bidden farewell to the old man, who received Grant's two rupees with the shyness of a boy, they crossed to the further side of Jacko's crest, and sat down with their backs to Simla, their faces towards a superb confusion of mountain peaks, whose far-spreading ravines were full of crowding trees. A soft mist hung above the dark tops of these trees; above it, high in the blue sky, the peaks of the everlasting mountains, which were congregated in a glowing mass, stood sharply out with an almost dazzling precision. The sense of distance in this majestic view was wellnigh as great as the sense of its strength and power. But it was neither the strength nor the distance of this scene which struck Laura. It was rather its beauty — the soft and tender beauty of the trees, filling the whole vast basin of the valley with their merging colours of many greens, and the rose-like beauty of the mountain summits burning against the turquoise sky. She felt herself seated high above the earth's surface, seated on a level with those opposite mountain peaks miles away across open air, dizzied by the umbrageous valleys flowing like a great sea far below her, and elated by the air, which was cold and keen with the snow and open splendour of these noble altitudes. It was as if she floated there on a magic carpet. The extreme beauty of the scene and the complete sense of nearness to the man she loved gave to Laura a feeling of exultation which was akin to intoxication of her whole being.

"Isn't it the very top of majesty?" he said, gazing at the great scene and letting his eyes travel slowly round the ring of mountains. "Hills always remind me of a sentence written by Gladstone. He was dealing with Creation, and spoke of the process by which *chaos* passed

into *kosmos;* the process by which (he said) confusion became order, medley became sequence, seeming anarchy became majestic law, and *horror softened into beauty.* I like those last words. Imagine these flaming, roaring hills, buried under steam and heaving with fire — imagine them growing gradually cold, gradually hard, gradually still, and gradually verdurous! Wouldn't you have given something to stand by and watch the horror of the Himalayas or the Alps soften into beauty?"

"And to pick the first wild flower!" she answered.

"Yes, imagine the first emergence of little flowers on the sides of these hills! No wonder the Mussulman says Allah is great. But does he realise that greatness, he or any other childlike and poetic man, as profoundly as an engineer apprehends it?"

She wanted to talk about herself, and kept silence. They were alone together, perhaps for the last time. What to her were these great mountains, the thought of Creation, the feeling of beauty? These things were but dust to the insistent clamour of her heart for the man's sympathy — this man alone with her in the midst of the hills.

"It is difficult," he said presently, shading his eyes to look across the valley to the distant mountains, "to think that this is India — the India of yellow plains and shrunken rivers, the India of so much misery and crowding squalor, of immemorial toil, patience, and resignation. Which is the finer, I wonder? I am under no delusion as to the character of the Indian peoples, and I really love these great hills, but I think the human plains are finer. What do you think? You like this best. Well, I don't know! I am one of those who honestly love the Indians. As nature has made them, and before we corrupt them with what passes as education, they are a most kind and trustful specimen of the human

species. I believe you too will come to love them one day. It's only the people that make one feel the true spell of the East. They are the real soul. Yes, I prefer the plains. Directly my business here is concluded I shall go down to the people, without regret — to the people and my work."

He filled his pipe, and continued in a matter-of-fact tone, "All the men I know who really enjoy India and who have no wish at all to go home are those who like the Indians. Some of them are good and virtuous men anxious to uplift the people; others are not good and not virtuous, and not anxious in the least about the moral welfare of India; but they like the people. And so India rewards them. They are happy out here; they don't want to go home. I know men who love the smells of the bazaars, who even enjoy the singing of nautch girls — a curious taste, that! — and who like the Indian custom of eating and the whole manner of Indian life. They score heavily against the European who refuses to change his spots. There's a real bewitchment in the jungle, and a real charm among the peasants — if you go to both in the right spirit. It's only in stations where society is more or less artificial that life out here is a tedium." He stopped and looked towards her, adding, "I wonder how you would like it if your husband got a civil appointment and you were able to escape from Us and get really face to face with Them. What do you think?"

"To tell you the truth," she answered, rather impatiently, "I have hardly given the Indians a thought."

"That is the usual way," he said, flinging away the match which had lighted his pipe. "People in military stations seldom realise the fact that they are living in the midst of three hundred odd millions of various mortals whose outlook on the universe and attitude to-

wards life is wholly different from their own. It rarely strikes them that in these strange neighbours there is a wonderful relief from ennui! I can assure you it is a fine field of exploration for the curious and the philanthropic. The interest is inexhaustible."

As he lay there in the sunshine, the brim of his hat pulled down over his eyes, his pipe held close to his lips, his long legs stretched at full length on the half-white, half-yellow burnt-up herbage of the knoll where they were resting, he told her strange and moving stories of Indian humanity, and strange and moving stories of deep-feeling Englishmen living alone among these simple childlike peoples of the East. He was very graphic and romantic, without effort. At first she was irritated by the turn of the conversation, then she felt he had purposely chosen this topic to avoid anything more personal and dangerous, and finally she forgot both irritation and suspicion in the interest she found in his narrative. She was so fascinated that she almost forgot, during the telling of these tales, the hunger at her heart for his affection; but in her fascination, like Desdemona, there was an ever-increasing apprehension of this man's power and strength and charm, so that in the end she found herself more than ever infatuated by him, and hopelessly entangled in the meshes of love. He had become more than ever an obsession in what seemed to her his calculated attempt to distract her from dangerous thoughts.

"I could love such an India," she said, "if I saw it all with one who understood and loved it too."

"Well, shall I try what I can do?"

She started. "What do you mean?"

"Your husband has a good record; I think a friend of mine up here might be able to get him something more interesting than regimental work."

She thought for a moment, picking at the dried herbage at her side, her eyes gazing across the valley to the rolling splendours of the westward-moving sun, which dazzled her face with a golden light.

"My husband," she replied slowly, "does not find Garampur dull. On the contrary! That is where the difficulty arises. Do you see it now? He adores the regiment: if he has a heaven on earth it is the orderly room. He is a very complete soldier. I think I have told you everything."

"Well, we will make him an offer, and see what comes of it. In the meantime, there will be work for your influence; the most interesting work for a married woman — the making of her husband."

She turned to him with a smile. "Do you mean that?"

He met her gaze, and nodded. "Yes," he said. "I really mean it. I know good women who have devoted everything to the making of their husbands; and they are happy women, happy because they have achieved something. Think of their old age — how good that will be."

She too nodded her head, and looked away from him. "I think there is more interesting work."

Her warm skin, her bright eyes, her soft lips, above everything else, her low musical voice, wrought upon his feelings. He was conscious not only of compassion, but of admiration. She was young, beautiful, adorable. "But one is bound by certain rules," he said, still looking at her.

Conscious that he was watching her, conscious of a change in his mood, she replied with the entreaty of pathos, "Oh, I dare say; but are they eternal? And in obeying these rules, these artificial rules, do we not sometimes violate the best impulses of our human nature?

I am not at all in love with these rules. I have lately been thinking over all I have read, and trying to form a just opinion about life and its human conditions. I have come to the conclusion that these rules of marriage, for instance, are often unjust, and that except for those who really love each other they are in the nature of an outrage. I have read about men with wives in lunatic asylums, their children going to ruin for want of a mother's care; I have read of women deserted by their husbands striving on the poor pittance they can earn to bring up their children, and often forming an illicit alliance solely for the sake of money. And in my own experience I have known people whose union, instead of sanctifying marriage, degraded and debased it. Of what use is it to refuse these people a divorce? What purpose is served by keeping all this misery and discord linked together?"

"None whatever, unless —"

"Everybody feels that the laws of divorce will have to be altered. But while the lawyers are fighting, how many hearts are being broken, and how many lives wasted! Marriage ought to be a joy, an attraction. I wish some strong and heroic man would arise now and put an end to all this sham and hypocrisy, which is so sordid and disgusting. I will tell you something; I can trust you. *I want to be free.* I don't want to go on any longer making a dull lie of my life. Quite frankly I tell you that my marriage was the act of a headstrong girl, a girl bewitched for a moment and quite unmindful of the consequences of that act. And now I repent, and I want deliverance. I want to be myself. I want to live."

"Do you know, Mrs. Ashworth, what you tell me is a great surprise?"

There was in his voice so genuine an amazement and

so gentle a rebuke, that Laura felt herself suddenly checked and thrown back.

She said weakly, not daring to look at him, "I have been meaning to tell you."

There was a considerable pause. Then he said, speaking very slowly, "I saw you parting from your husband at the railway station. It made a deep impression on me. I thought what a pathetic picture it made — the young husband, the wonderfully fair girl from England; and all the love and sacrifice it signified, or seemed to signify — the wife going to the hills, the husband remaining in the plains to meet the summer alone. It seemed to me very touching. A page out of England's history in India. I wished that people at home could see it, and feel the humanity and pathos of our government."

She was thunderstruck. She looked down at her hands in her lap, the fingers of which were idly and rather nervously fidgeting with the folds of her skirt. "Is that what you were really thinking when you first saw me?" she asked, glancing at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"I thought you were both extremely fond of each other."

"So we are," she managed to say, miserably, and with a sense of guilt. "But don't you see it's different now. I mean, I like him and respect him, and I know that he is a good husband. But he doesn't interest me. It's no use pretending that he does. I wouldn't tell anybody else in the world what I am telling you, and I only tell you because I know you will respect my confidence and because I think you will understand, and because I'm nearly dying for sympathy. You mustn't think ill of me. I'm in just such a mood as drives a creature nearly mad. I feel as if all the world is armed to afflict

me, as if things above are going to fall upon me and crush me; I feel as if I have signed away with my own hand all the joy and rapture and delight of this short existence, and have been cheated into monotony and discordance and despair, which will never end. I'm like a bird in a cage. It's perfectly hateful. It's unendurable. I see it so clearly and vividly — the dreadful future, the appalling future, the long, long interminable future in the plains; no music but military bugles: no conversation but station gossip: no delight, no excitement, no pleasure — nothing but everlasting heat, everlasting sameness, everlasting helplessness and despair. No growth, no development, no enthusiasm, no love. Isn't that terrible for a woman of my age?"

"I know; it is terrible. And it's common. But there's a way out."

"Oh, I can see the way out, but I haven't the courage."

"There's a better way out — older, safer, and better, much better."

She said vigorously, "I want love."

"That is the way out I mean."

She turned quickly and looked at him. "Oh," she cried, with her teeth set, her eyes shining, her cheeks flushed, "I wish you meant the same thing!"

"I want to tell you what I mean."

"But it isn't the same thing!"

"Do you know why I have sought you so often?" he asked quietly.

She started. "Are you going to tell me that you don't care for me?" she exclaimed, gazing at him.

"No."

"You do care?"

"Yes; I care."

She smiled. "That makes me happy." For a moment she kept her eyes away; then, suddenly, turning to

him her passionate and eager face, which was so soft and tender and wonderful in the sunlight, the little eyes screwed up, the teeth almost clenched, the breath coming quickly and boldly between the red lips, she asked him, "Don't you feel sometimes, don't you feel now, an impulse to forget everything, an impulse to be perfectly and naturally happy?"

"Yes!" he cried, and for a moment she thought he would lift his hand and touch her.

"Then, why not?" she whispered. "I love you; there is no one in my heart but you."

"Because," he answered steadily, but visibly struggling for resolution, "there is something else."

She leaned towards him, and he grew pale. "Don't," he cried, "for Heaven's sake!" He added slowly, hardening his eyes, "I want you to listen."

"Let us be happy," she whispered entreatingly. "We are so near to it; let us be perfectly happy."

He leaned back from her. "No," he said, "not yet. You must listen first."

"I am happy," she said, still looking at him. "I know that you love me, and now I can talk to you about my love for you. How good it is, to love and be loved, whatever the barriers! There is no discord now. I am at unity with myself. I will tell you wonderful things by and by."

He got upon his feet. "You dazzled me!" he said.

"Sit with me a little longer," she pleaded, lifting a hand to him,

He took it, and held it. "Will you listen to me?" he asked, looking down.

She watched him curiously, her hand pliant in his.

"Yes," she said softly, and smiled with ardent and rejoicing love into his troubled eyes.

He released her hand and sat down again, but at a

greater distance from her side. He did not recline full length on the burnt herbage, but sat upright, looking before him towards the everlasting hills.

"Mrs. Ashworth," he said, "I want to tell you first, why I have sought you so frequently in Simla. I was touched, as I have told you, by that parting at the railway station between the young wife and the soldier husband. Well, there was something more. I thought how tragic a thing it would be if you, so young and fair and ignorant of the world, returned to that boy husband with a ghost in your heart. At Kalka I saw you in the hands of a man who is not particularly chivalrous towards women; at Barogh I noticed that this man was already establishing claims on your generosity; and at Simla I observed that he was full set to run you down and make you his victim. For the sake of the husband left behind in the plains I threw myself between a young, inexperienced, pure girl, and a rogue. I thought first of all that my friend Grace Langton might be help enough; I went to her at once and asked her to call upon you; but later I perceived that the rogue demanded stronger measures. I did not want to get him sent down from Simla, and there was scarcely evidence enough to justify such a course; and so I made myself his rival before your reputation should suffer. I knew you then to be intelligent and thoughtful. I felt sure that you would be glad of your freedom from the dulness of a bore; I hoped that you might find a superior pleasure in the society of an older and a more intelligent mind. And I knew that people in Simla would not whisper where I was concerned; for I am no philanderer. Your reputation would not suffer. At any rate, for the sake of the young husband in the plains I laid siege to your attention, and I routed my rival."

"And you also captured the citadel."

He drew a breath, hardening his features. Then he said with a grave deliberation, "That was a risk. There was also another. If you have suffered, Mrs. Ashworth, so have I. You had better know that. Believe me, I as little anticipated or desired that you should grow fond of me as that I should grow fond of you. We have both suffered. But we are both good people. We have ideas of honour. Neither of us is merely an animal. Let us see together, both of us wounded, how we can adjust matters."

"Far better if you had never interfered!" she exclaimed sadly. "I was perfectly safe."

Something in the tone of his voice, in his attitude, in the deliberate choice of his words, chilled her blood with a sense of poignant humiliation and a feeling of bitter inferiority. She had confessed her most secret love, and the man had not fallen into her arms. He stood firm. He held her off. He looked down upon her. Yet, if he had yielded and besought her passionately for love, she would surely have struggled and pleaded. Her real hunger was for his sympathy.

"You will learn to forgive me if we both —"

"I am not sorry you interfered," she said quickly, for in speaking he had looked at her, and the expression of his eyes had emptied her heart of everything but love. "Whatever the consequences, I am glad," she said firmly.

"We must try to put our friendship on a lasting basis."

"I wonder if that is possible."

"I think it is."

"When a woman loves a man," she said quietly, "really and deeply loves him, she is not conscious of wrong. Men, I suppose, have many considerations that they weigh against love. A woman has none. She feels that it is a paramount command of her nature. I am

speaking of the deepest love. A woman deeply in love feels that any other caress is abominable. To be caressed only by the man she loves is for her a great righteousness."

There was a long silence between them. Then he said slowly, thoughtfully, and with a tone of almost wounding detachment in his strong voice, "Everything is chaos, without the religious principle."

She started. The idea of religion, as touching their lives, as affecting their relations, had not occurred to her. It seemed incongruous in such a colloquy. It did not belong. The very mention of it had changed the tone of his voice, had somehow affected the atmosphere.

"I do not understand religion," she said, rather coldly.

After a moment he replied, as though disappointed with her, "Oh, but it is not hard to understand — the religion that means anything. At any rate, I find that it is only by holding firm to the religious principle that I can live my life as a logical man. I don't profess to have the complete and childlike faith of Grace Langton; but I have faith in the elements of her religion, and by those elements alone I can live as a rational being."

"What are the elements of religion?" She turned to him and their eyes encountered. She was almost contemptuous.

He looked at her, studying her, as it were, and then removing his eyes, he said, "Let me tell you an experience which came to me rather early in my life. It will help you to understand my point of view. I went as a comparatively young man to stay with a friend of mine, whom I had not seen for some three or four years. He was married to a woman who seemed to me interesting and not without charm. After I had been a day in the house I saw that he was carrying on a low intrigue with their parlourmaid; behind his wife's back, there were

oglings, meetings in corridors, and all the rest of it. I was not a religious man, I was not making much of a fight for goodness, but I felt the whole atmosphere of that house to be disagreeable and bad. I felt uncomfortable; the house had ceased to be a home. I was glad to escape from it. A few weeks after this experience, I went to stay with a man whose wife was lying ill in a nursing home. I found that the house — rather a large place in the country — was being kept by a cousin of my friend — a young, beautiful, and singularly sweet girl of two or three and twenty. Instead of intrigue between these two, there was a genuine and true-ringing friendship, marked by a most chivalrous manner on the man's part, who was a good squire, a keen naturalist, and a sportsman of the best kind. One night I went with them both to see my friend's children put to bed. The pretty cousin heard the prayers of the little girl: my friend heard the prayers of the little boy. I was struck by the wholesome atmosphere of this home. The beauty of that true and honourable life came home to me. I compared it with my other experience, and saw the immense difference between these two men. For a long time I did not appreciate its significance. Then it dawned upon my mind, and had a determining influence on my character. The difference between the two men was not a difference of temperament, but the same difference which from the very beginning of history humanity has seen between good and evil. There is a right and there is a wrong. The choice between these two presents itself to every human being. According to that choice is the manner of a man's life. All life, the drama of it and the evolution of it, lies in that conflict between good and evil."

As he ceased speaking, she put her hands to her eyes and pressed them there. The sun struck a star of light

on her wedding ring,— that little ring of civilisation in the midst of the mountains.

"I am listening," she said, in a low voice.

The smothered anguish in these few words wrung his heart, but he set his teeth and fought against the natural impulse to comfort her, like a surgeon whose business it is to save a life.

He said quietly, "My autobiography is almost at an end," thinking hard how he could best speak to give direction and a wise purpose to this troubled life. "Well," he continued, "I came to see that without the religious principle there is no valid reason why a man should struggle to be good, no valid reason why a man should not give free rein to the impulses of his lower nature. Philosophy could not help me. All the ancient philosophers who taught morality believed in gods of some kind, and at least acknowledged the possibility of a persistence of the soul after death. The latter-day philosophers of materialism had nothing logical to say about Conduct. How could they? If we are animals, if we die like the brutes, if moral responsibility is nothing more than a survival of superstition and priestcraft, why should a man make any effort towards an impossible perfection, why waste his time striving to educate the finer qualities of his nature? I saw that no materialist dare face this question. I saw, further, that materialistic politicians regard religion as a policeman, and dare not do without it. And then I came finally to see that all must be chaos and confusion, all life a hideous brutality, all virtue and goodness at the hazard of temperament, without the religious principle. That was my illumination. Mercifully it came early in my life."

She took her hands from her eyes. "Nobody can be argued into religion," she said; "and yet nobody can be happy without it."

"I am not attempting . . ." he began.

"No; I know you are not. Besides, I have always been interested. I have often thought about it. But go on. I like listening."

He paused for a moment. Then very slowly, striking the ground every now and then with his open hand, he said emphatically, but as if to himself, "I saw that religion of some kind is only a political necessity because it is a vital necessity; that the politician cannot safeguard the public order without it, only because the individual cannot order his single and private life without it; that religion is more than logical morality, more than a theory of the universe, more than an attitude of the soul towards the invisible — I saw that it is life, the individual life of multitudinous humanity. While theologians and men of science are disputing about trifles, the multitudes are fighting each in his own soul the real battle which determines history and evolution, the battle of good and evil. And unless the multitudes are so fighting, I perceived that theologian and man of science would either be swept aside in a universal cataclysm of savage animalism or left penniless by a democracy effete, careless, and degenerate."

Her contempt, anger, disappointment, and bitter sense of humiliation had vanished. Her intellect was aroused, and she listened intently.

He said in the same voice, as though he were arguing with a man: "Everything depends on the individual unit trying to be a little better — everything. Either that strain and effort; or — a reversion to type. The world cannot stand still. Well, I saw this clearly and sanely. And from that moment, with many blunders and many stumbles, I have held fast to the religious principle. I believe that there is purpose in life, and that we are morally responsible. I believe that there is reason

in the strife between good and evil. And I am perfectly certain that unless there is moral struggle (unintelligible without religion) there can be no security for civilisation." He turned to her suddenly. "Won't *you* see that?" he demanded.

Laura's mind had become slowly conscious of a certain calming down, almost a peace, as Grant was speaking. He seemed to be recalling her to the earliest thoughts of her own heart. She thought, first of all, as he told the story of the children's prayers in the country house, of her own mothering of her little sisters, of her own efforts to keep them pure and good, of her appeal to poor Rose in the bedroom, with Philly Syston's letter in her hand, of that night in Olive's house when she had first met Basil and had heard the children's prayers. Pure prayers of innocence and sweetness! Ah, Heaven, how she had changed since those days! Then there had recurred to her, as if a voice whispered in her ear, that phrase of Grace Langton's, *life without religion.* She no longer felt that this conversation was incongruous or unnatural. And, finally, when he had ceased, she was aware of a new unrest, disquiet and disturbance in her soul, of a longing after satisfaction and peace of heart, of something in her nature which even his love, if it came to her in full torrent, could not satisfy. While he had been speaking, she had been thinking.

"I was brought up to believe," she said quietly, "that religion is a superstition. I have never quite got over that early training. I don't think I understand it. Why is there such endless confusion about so urgent a matter?"

Grant detected the change in her voice, and hurried forward in his speech: "Oh, of course, enormous harm has been done," he answered, "by the professional apostles of religion. For the most part they have either

adopted the timorous attitude of apologists towards infidelity, or the insufferable attitude of a conceited superiority based on a little ridiculous traditionalism. Fatal — both those attitudes. And so it comes about that some people do not trouble to understand it. They are not interested. They think it is negligible. They go about their business with what they call an open mind, which is another way of putting indifference. But the true attitude of religion to unbelief, and to all loose thinking, I hold, is a calm, passionless, and deliberate challenge."

He paused, his brow clouded with thought.

"Religion," he said, "should not cringe to materialism; it should defy and challenge materialism. Take, for instance, the subject we first began to talk about, the subject of marriage. You asked me, citing certain cases — do you remember? — how I could justify such unhappiness, such discord, such misery. I said there was no answer, unless —. And then you interrupted. My *unless,* was Hamlet's respect that makes calamity of so long ~~end~~. There is no answer, no possible answer, unless the struggle for goodness is the heart and soul of this earthly existence. Why should any man be faithful to his wife, why should any wife keep faith with her husband, why should life not be a long *liaison,* a perpetual intrigue, a hungering and thirsting after romantic excitement, a total and utter orgy for those who want such a thing, *unless* the evolution of the race towards moral perfection is the very reason of our existence? I cannot see; I really cannot see."

He looked at her; she nodded as if she approved, and he continued with new energy.

"Religion challenges materialism, and defies it to carry its thesis to a logical conclusion. It points to men making the struggle to reclaim bad wives, or to live happily

with uncongenial wives — men who forgive in their wives even the very worst of sins; it points to women who sacrifice youth, beauty, health, and enjoyment for their children's sakes, and who renounce every material pleasure to lead bad husbands back to goodness and purity — and it asks materialism whether it is good for the race that such heroic battle is carried on, or whether it would be just as well with evolution if each went his own way, seeking at the whim of the moment pleasure and gratification of the senses above and before everything else. Is there to be any restraint at all: any wrestle of character for strength and goodness? If so, for what purpose? Materialism cannot answer. Materialism cannot even give a logical reason for teaching boys not to lie and encouraging them to practise gentleness and self-sacrifice. To be consistent as a gospel of life it should teach boys to lie subtly and cunningly, should practise and drill them in deceit, should make them unscrupulous in self-seeking and self-aggrandisement. Instead of Jesus, it should give humanity Machiavelli and Lord Chesterfield. This is not a jest on my part; it is hardest logic. Religion challenges materialism at every point of our social life, and at every point materialism is silent. It is only among perplexed professors in the nebulous region of hypothesis that materialism is voluble. Bring it to the street corner, introduce it into the homes of humanity, face it in the midst of the multitude with practical existence, and you will find that to the challenge of religion it is dumb. Surely, then, there is something profoundly real in this religion, this religion without which you cannot give one single logical reason for renunciation, for pity, for kindness, for truth, for purity, for sweetness, for honour!"

He turned and looked at her. She was touched, but apparently she was still troubled. He glanced away,

wondering what he could say to her — the engineer with his clear and logical brain confused by the heart of the woman. Much more gently he said, "However indifferent you may have been to religion in the past, you must see its urgency now. Your life forces you to religion. Your life, without religion, is so difficult. But consider. Is there anything in the whole world except religion which gives any promise to transform that difficult life into serenity and peace?"

He turned his head and scrutinised her. Their eyes met. It seemed to Laura that he looked older but stronger, harder but in some great manner nobler and more heroic. She felt that she now saw him for the first time. The very soul appeared to watch from his eyes and wait for her to speak. Her admiration for him increased; her love deepened. It was the same admiration, the same love — but transfigured. All that she had heard about this solitary strong man recurred to her mind — his great achievements, his power, his sympathy. She understood it all now in a new manner. He was more to her than an interesting man. He was a living soul. Quietly he had stolen her thoughts from selfishness and led them to God; quietly he had made the turmoil of her heart, not an individual's war of appetite, but the total struggle of humanity after goodness and purity.

The force of his argument struck home to her mind. The idea that religion was something of first and supreme importance in human life opened a new window for her on this infinite universe. It came to her chiefly with his declaration that religion did not stand among men with an apology but a challenge on its lips. A challenge! — she had never thought of that. That was a new outlook for her soul. A challenge, an unanswerable challenge. Why had she taught her sisters to be

good, why had she striven so hard to correct little faults of character in herself, why had she repulsed Reden, and why had she not amused herself with Syston? Religion challenged her with these questions, and with a hundred others. It was a strange thing; she could not justify a single virtue, except with religion.

Something else enforced the argument of Grant upon her mind.

The heat of the day had passed. The sun was out of sight behind dark trees which stood solemn and immovable against a primrose heaven. Across the valleys, dense with foliage far below her feet, lay a profound shadow. The summits of the tall mountains, range upon range — an everlasting wall of golden rock and lambent snow — were clothed with a deep peace. Stillness folded this great scene of majesty and power. And this stillness was no longer beautiful and tender, no longer gracious and delightful, but solemn with a great silence that was like God waiting for an answer.

While she had listened to the man at her side her eyes had rested upon this scene, and the solemnity of it, the superb hush and reverent quiet of it, had unconsciously entered her mind and unconsciously suffused her spirit with the feeling of a Presence, and that sense sublime

> Of something far more deeply interfused
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

She was touched to reverence, she was awed into humility. She was conscious of the grandeur and mystery of this vast universe.

No longer did she feel resentment at his introduction of religion, no longer did she feel that religion was in-

congruous to their relation one to another. It seemed to her that she was at last face to face with a great reality, and that without this reality all was disturbance and uncertainty.

But she was still troubled by the natural scepticism of her temperament, natural because she had never been taught as a child the exquisite beauty and deep-reaching tenderness of religion. If her father and mother could at that moment have seen the unrest and turmoil of her soul, they might have been conscience-stricken by a tremendous responsibility not only neglected but ignored.

"Tell me," she said, looking up to the dim sky over her head; "how much of religion do you believe? I mean the religion of the churches."

He began to get up from the ground. "It is time we were moving," he said; "but don't think I want to avoid your question. We will talk of it another day. For the moment I want to discuss something else." He helped her to rise. She stood looking across the scene for a moment, tranquil and beautiful. "You don't regret that you came here?" he asked.

"Must we really go?" she answered sadly. Then, without waiting for answer, she turned to him with a natural and innocent impulse, smiling into his eyes. "I shall remember," she said, with her caressing voice, "till the end of my life, whatever happens, this day on the hills. I think it will be the most beautiful memory in my life. You know how true it is, what I have told you. It is true still; it will always be true. I love you. I am not ashamed of that confession, because I am not ashamed of my love. You came into my life on an impulse of chivalry; you wanted to serve me, you wanted to save me. I am grateful for that impulse, and it makes me admire you more than ever. But I am glad — I can't help it — that you have got to love me. It is fine

of you to put restraint on yourself, noble not to take advantage of my weakness; but to my heart it is sweetest of all things else, that you love me."

She put out her hand, and he took it, held it, raised it a little, and stooped and kissed it. "You are a noble woman," he said, his voice once more tender and human, "as well as the most beautiful I have ever known."

For a moment she was aware of frightful temptation. But she put restraint upon herself and summoned all her resolution to her help. The very consciousness of this struggle in her soul was a confirmation to her of all that Grant had said. Life is a real contest between evil and good. Somehow his very rejection of her love had ennobled it, elevated it above the sordid level of illegality and intrigue.

"Now, let us go down," she said. "It is getting dark, but I think the way will be clearer."

CHAPTER XIII

As they moved away Laura complained laughingly of stiffness, and for a few paces walked with all the painful and amusing awkwardness of inflexible joints.

"I hope I have not produced a like effect upon your mind!" said Grant, watching her with a smile in his eyes.

"Oh, no; my mind was so interested that it forgot to attend to its other duties." She laughed at her ungainly walk, made an effort, and presently walked firmly and well. "I have been reading a book," she said, raising her face to the sky, "about the subconscious self. What a lot of work takes place in our bodies of which we know nothing! How many things we do, or something does for us, automatically! Walking, for instance. And I had never thought before about the process of nourishment. The same blood, in every creature, no matter what food is eaten, converts itself into flesh, bone, hair, nails, cartilage, and all the rest of it. And all automatically, without our conscious direction. How wonderful, how perplexing!"

He looked at her. "I am glad you read such books. I am sure they help us. The greatest danger that can afflict the race comes from lightness, frivolity, flippancy, that stupid attitude of the cheerful smatterer. Life is so absorbingly interesting, the whole scheme of things is so full of grandeur, that it is more dreadful to see it slighted than to hear it explained away as a curious experiment in chemistry. If people were only interested in the big things there would be less littleness in the

world, and I believe that littleness is the mother of most iniquity — it is the active and practical denial of God."

"Tell me," she said, "what you really believe about Christianity."

"But first I want to talk to you about something else. I want to talk about yourself and your future life. Will you let me discuss the matter of a civil appointment for your husband?"

"No," she answered, turning to him, "because if religion becomes real to me Garampur will cease to torment me."

"You are a brave woman."

"No; I only see the logic of what you have said. If religion gives one character enough to resist temptation, energy enough to practise self-sacrifice, and enthusiasm enough to seek the happiness of other people, it should also give one sovereignty over one's surroundings. If religion is a challenge to materialism, surely it must be a defiance to environment."

"Absolutely true! It is the one explanation of mystery, and the one medicine for suffering."

"But I want to know how much I can believe." She had Ruth's feelings towards this man, *Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.* His power over her was such that he could have turned her soul into any direction, directions the most divergent.

"As I told you just now," he said, holding her arm as they walked slowly with small steps down a precipitous descent through the trees, "I would far rather that you discussed this matter with Grace Langton. She has travelled farther than I have travelled. She has had an infinitely deeper experience. The charm which everybody feels in her presence is authority for the truth of her beliefs; it could not come from a lie, it is too spiritual and too beautiful. We ought to think far more

than we do of that repose and tranquillity and sweetness which everybody experiences in the society of perfectly good people. It is an argument. It ought to concern men of science. Earthworms and fossils and vibrations are not more likely to give us a clue to the truth of things. But we overlook it."

"Tell me what you believe."

He walked for a few moments in silence. "Do you know," he said presently, "I have never yet attempted to formulate any creed? I doubt very much if Christianity can ever be compressed into one or two, or even a score of formulas. It is one thing to one man, a different thing to another, and a wholly different thing to a third. It is a mischievous and foolish thing to abbreviate the Character of Jesus, which is the Soul of Christianity, into a set of rigid dogmas. Religion isn't a school of thought. It isn't a science. It's life. It's the individual soul seeking to establish communion with its origin and its destiny. And how various is that individual soul! You can see the danger of making religion a rigid and cast-iron form of words not only in the narrowness and isolation of the Roman Church, but in the unyielding intolerances of Hinduism and Muhamadanism. Wherever religion sets up an infallible set of opinions, it becomes water-logged and belated. It denies the clear fact of evolution. In the most important aspect of man's progress it denies the principle of growth. That is absurd. On the other hand, Jesus Himself, Who was always warning religious people of this danger, likens His teaching to leaven and a grain of mustard seed. He was a great evolutionist. Could He be anything else, seeing that He bade humanity seek Perfection?"

"But," she said, speaking slowly, "who was Jesus,

and how do you think about Him? Everything centres there, doesn't it?"

"Well, this is where I would far rather that you consulted Grace Langton," he replied. "But I won't shirk your question. I only ask you to remember that there may be deeper truths than I myself am able to perceive. Heaven forbid that I should set up to be a profoundly spiritual man. No engineer, probably, is that. My whole custom of thought is against enthusiasm, against acceptance of what has gone before, against unquestioning belief in finality of any kind. I am one who tries everything, who contrives means to an end, who perceives that the solution of one problem is the discovery of another, who relies absolutely on reason."

It was growing darker at every step of their downward path. The trees crowded closer about them, black and impenetrable above, dim and ghostly on either side, misty and uncertain in front. The cries of animals and birds came to them through the dense forest. A feeling of cold began to sharpen the still air. Here and there, in a broken gap of the trees, they caught sight of stars in the violet vault of heaven and patches of snow looming on the side of the hill.

"Tell me," she cried, "what to believe in. Help me. Tell me what you believe. I want to be sure about things."

Quietly, thinking over every sentence as he uttered it, Grant gave expression to his first Credo as they descended through the trees. His voice was low, he spoke with the same sense of self-absorption which at first had so hurt and disappointed her heart; but now she listened with a spirit of reverence, almost of awe, as though his soul had taken her into its most sacred confidence.

"I begin," he said, "with One God, the absolute

First Cause of the universe; I reach faith in this God by the mind displayed in creation, the order, the beauty, the intelligence, the majestic power which confronts me at every turn of my observation. Next, I believe, through history and my own experience among savage races, in the evolution of the human species from a lowly origin; and this faith forces me to believe in a soul, in something possessed by man which differentiates him from all other creatures on this earth, since no other creature has written and printed thought, or made itself instruments of music, or changed in one single respect, over long æons of time, the customs and employments of its remotest progenitors. Next, I believe that among all the mysterious beings who have appeared in history and by the force of spiritual power have effected enormous changes in the human race, which is so different from all other creatures on the earth's surface, none is comparable with Jesus; and I reach this conclusion by the effect which Christianity, even a partial and often a disfigured Christianity, has already had upon various nations alien to the race and traditions of its Founder. Next, through Jesus, I am able to believe, in spite of some evidence in nature to the contrary, that the One God, the absolute First Cause of the universe, is Father of humanity; and I reach this faith because I see that love is the greatest force in human affairs — love and self-sacrifice and forgiveness, which are unintelligible on a materialistic hypothesis; wholly unintelligible. And last of all, coming as close as I can to the historical Jesus, I am forced to the conclusion that He produced an extraordinary effect of personality upon His contemporaries, that He possessed powers greater than other men have displayed, and also that He was seen after His death by His disheartened disciples, and chief of all by one of the most remarkable and noble men that ever

lived, who was turned suddenly from a persecutor of the new religion into its most able and unwavering advocate. But not only because of this do I call Jesus a Divine Being. I am forced to acknowledge Him as supreme among men and different from all others that have ever lived, because by His power and in His name the worst and most degraded human creatures are every day and in almost every country of the world converted into spiritual beings. No other man has ever done this miracle. And so I think of Jesus as a Divine Being. Whether He was born of human parents, or whether He was born in the manner described by two of the evangelists, I cannot say, and it does not seem to me in the least important. A Divine Being would not be less a Divine Being because He animated the body of an ordinary human child, just as He would not be any more a Divine Being because His human body was prepared for Him in a non-natural manner. It is the inhabiting Spirit that counts. It is only the Spirit that we can understand. To say that Jesus was an ordinary man seems to me a bold assertion. To say that He was born in a natural manner does not derogate for me from the essential Divinity of His Spirit. I rest myself upon the Character of Jesus. I think I could attempt to live as His follower without the resurrection; but the miracle of Christianity's earliest years compels me to believe that in some manner or another this Divine Being appeared to His disciples after death."

She stopped as they came within sight of the roofs and lights of Simla, sprinkled through the trees below them. The sound of voices ascended to them. The stir of the mountain town rejoicing in the cool of the evening came in a murmur from the broad spaces and curving streets just below them.

To everything he had said she had listened with an

undivided attention. Her nature, which had never been flippant, had always been inclined to seriousness. This forbidden love in her heart had been serious to her. There was nothing at all in her character which made men like Reden and Syston a solid danger. And now this same seriousness of mind accompanied her into a new region of thought. Her heart, perhaps, was not touched by religion; but her reason was interested. She had followed Grant's line of thought with an assenting intellect. It made Christianity something new, real, and reasonable.

"You have made it plain to me," she said. "I understand it as you understand it. I think it is enough."

"Oh, but there must be more," he answered. "There is no finality in revelation. Sometimes I find myself haunted by the element of Sacrifice in Christianity. I will tell you why. Those who believe in a Sacrifice for sin are those who most faithfully do the work of Christianity — visiting the sick, nursing the poor, helping the prisoners, rescuing the children, and, above everything else, seeking the abandoned and the lost. I should like you to talk to Grace Langton about this mystery of religion. I think she understands it."

"Yes," said Laura, turning to descend; "but for the present this is enough: with the idea of religion which you have given me I can challenge my temptations, defy my environment, and take up my duty. I see light. For the first time in my life, I think, I feel myself a rational being, and am conscious of direction. It's like a new birth. I must think about it, and read about it."

After a moment he said slowly, "Some people believe greatly in prayer. I think they must be right."

"Do you believe in it?" she asked.

"As an aspiration, yes. I am not certain about it as a request. But, the saints believe in it."

CHAPTER XIV

THERE were two letters waiting for Laura. One was from her husband, the other was from her brother, King. Her first instinct was to read King's letter before the other; but some impulse born of her conversation with Grant induced her to open the letter from Basil. It was as if she wished to begin at once, in however small a way, the cultivation of the affection of a wife.

Basil's letter moved her greatly. Hitherto he had written in a more or less cheerful strain, seeking to amuse her with scandal, gossip, and the humorous affairs of the station. But there was nothing of this in his present communication. It was almost such a letter as Keats wrote once or twice, out of his wretchedness and most morbid mood, to the absent Fanny Brawne. Basil, it appeared, had dreamed three nights in succession that Laura had ceased to love him and that she had given herself to another man. Tortured by this dream, he poured out a torrent of love, implored her to tell him the truth, and promised henceforth to devote his whole life to her happiness. Then, in a postscript, he begged her to forgive him for these jealous ideas and ascribed his mood to the frightful heat and the loneliness of his existence.

She read the letter twice, conscience-stricken, and yet not guilty. She was profoundly sorry for him, profoundly glad that Grant had saved her from a false step; at the same time — regretful for infidelity in thought, and mindful of the burden he was bearing in the heated plains — she could not help contrasting this

man with the other and feeling his inferiority. She wished he was stronger, that it might be easier for her.

In this mood, she took up King's letter, observing without surprise that the stamp bore the postmark of Bombay. She opened it, still thinking of Basil, but with the first few words of this letter her thoughts were torn sharply away from him. King's letter was a brutal and careless confession of crime, and an almost peremptory demand for money — a demand linked with a threat to commit suicide.

He had taken bribes from the Indians. On the first discovery of this high sin against the Raj, the authorities had contented themselves with a warning; on the second occasion, they had told him that he must retire or stand a prosecution. So he had gone away, and for three or four weeks had been drifting about Bombay, begging from Europeans at the doors of offices, appealing for help from officers at the entry to clubs and theatres, sleeping in the worst quarters of the town, allying himself with Indians of the lowest character, and spending his days and nights in drinking and gambling.

Tears came into Laura's eyes as she read this terrible letter. She remembered how her childhood had gone in mothering this boy, how she had loved him, how she had endeavoured on many occasions to stand between the beautiful and daring child and parental chastisement, how she had helped him in his lessons, taught him to be good, and sought to direct his soul towards virtue.

And this was the end. It had been a case of the blind leading the blind. She had never been taught the great sanction and consecration of goodness. She had given her brother and her sisters an illogical morality, just as she had given them arithmetic and geography. There had been no passion, no emotion, no hungering and thirsting in this morality.

A sudden anger against her father and her mother took possession of her heart. "This is their work, it is their responsibility!" she exclaimed to herself. She thought of poor Rose. "That, too, is their responsibility." She thought of the other sisters growing hard and selfish and vulgar and commonplace in the battle of life. "That, too, is their responsibility." She thought of Olive. For a moment she was checked in her indignation. Olive was sweet and happy and unselfish. She had been treated like the others. She was not religious. And yet she was good. But it came to her that this was but a negative and narrow goodness — that there was nothing in Olive's heart like the compassion of those who seek to rescue the definitely lost and the hopelessly degraded, nothing of Grace Langton's spiritual tranquillity, nothing of Grant's dignity, nothing of passionate devotion to the poor, the sorrowful, and the abandoned, nothing in her life which attracted and exalted. Olive mothered her own little ones, but she lifted not a finger and devoted not a penny to save the unwanted children of unmarried mothers. It was a selfish life, however good the selfishness. It lacked self-sacrifice, it was entirely without glory. And yet, with her pure, sweet heart, how great an influence she might have been with the impulse of religion in her soul. "And that, too," she reflected, "is their responsibility."

But these thoughts fled before the urgent necessity of sending help to her brother. What should she do? She had no money to spare; and if she had, would it not go in drink and gambling? She could not go to Bombay. She knew no one there to whom she could hopefully appeal for her brother's rescue. What could she do? How could she save him?

There was no one but Robert Grant. Among all the men and women she had met in Simla, kind and pleasant

people who had been singularly sweet and gracious to her, none stood out so clearly and obviously as this righteous man. The very thought of him was a comfort and a hope to her.

She sent the letter of her brother, enclosed with one of her own, by a messenger to the club. In half an hour Grant was at the hotel.

"I want you," he said, when they had greeted, and he had been kind and comforting, "to let me show his letter to Grace Langton. I will tell you why. I can only send money and can only get the Commissioner of Police to look after your brother and see that he does not get into mischief. But Grace Langton can do more. She knows people in Bombay who devote their lives to saving men and women in the condition of your brother. I have only to show her this letter to surround him with friendship and strength."

Laura thought for a moment, watching him with steady eyes, a finger laid across her lips which she was biting unconsciously. Presently she raised her head. "Let me have the letter," she said; "I will take it myself."

His face almost shone. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "that will be far better."

"Is she going out to-night?"

"No," said Grant, calling a chaprassi and bidding him order a rickshaw. "Why not change and go and dine with her alone? I will send a message to say you are coming."

So Laura went to Grace Langton, and as the rickshaw carried her over the soft and beautiful road to Chota Simla, the moonlight flooding the open spaces in the dark pines, the stars burning whitely through the topmost branches of the highest trees, the corrugated roofs shining like heavy snow, the little lights in the houses on

the side of the precipice and across the valley glimmering with an orange radiance between the trunks and through the branches of the deodars — she said to herself again and again, "It is the people who believe most who most can save. It is not Robert Grant, but Grace Langton who has the power to redeem."

Till late at night Laura sat with this gentle and winning woman, this attractive and brilliant woman who possessed the human charm of Anna Karénina with the nobility of mind, the cleanness of heart, and the loftiness of soul which characterise almost all good and educated English women who give themselves to humanity. She promised Laura that a telegram should be sent early in the morning to Bombay, and assured her that influences of the highest and most sacred nature would immediately move towards her brother and encompass his soul.

From the tragic business of King, they passed to the work of religious people, and from the work of religious people to religion itself.

Laura came away from the spell of Grace Langton's personality and from this discussion about religion with the feeling that she would never be able to find in Christ the same measure of mysterious and haunting Divinity as was so real and insistent to Grace. She was not conscious of inferiority in this conviction; but she did not, at the same time, think with indulgence of Grace's faith as something false because it was not true to her. She said to herself, "Christ could sometimes do no mighty works because of people's unbelief. And He was one spirit to Peter, another to John, and another to Judas. He can only reveal Himself to the extent of each individual's perceptions. He depends upon our faith. And our power of faith is determined in no small measure for us by our early training, our environment, and our heredity. Francis of Assisi was born nearer to God than

Nero and Robespierre. It was as easy for John to believe and love, as it was easy for Judas to doubt and suspect."

But when she got back to the hotel, and when she had undressed for the night, it occurred to her that she should help this new spirit in her life by prayer. It was many years since she had kneeled down and sent her thoughts into the silence of infinity. Under the influence of Laurence Payne she had tried to pray, but her prayers had been self-conscious and accompanied by doubt and criticism. Long ago she had given up the idea that unuttered thoughts reach through everlasting space to the Heart of God. She had come, indeed, to regard prayer as an idle and foolish superstition.

Something that Grant had said was in her mind as she kneeled beside her bed. She realised that people who do not pray and who regard religion as a superstition are but a tiny fraction of the world's many millions. She had hitherto thought of them as the grand army of culture and progress; but now she realised that all culture and all progress depend upon and are absolutely conditioned by the struggle against evil and the aspiration after goodness, which are the two central efforts of the souls of the uncountable millions of the human race.

So she prayed with the sense of harmony with humanity, not alone, and not insignificant, but as one of a vast multitude everywhere aspiring to goodness, everywhere seeking to conquer weakness and sin, everywhere longing for heaven and all the joy and felicity of everlasting life.

As she prayed, the need in her heart for the surety of God's love, the hunger and passion of her soul for a sense of the nearness of God, constrained her thoughts to the Person of Christ. With a great longing she desired the faith of Grace Langton. That longing, un-

uttered in her prayer, was the prayer itself. She felt herself drawn towards Christ, and impelled by a gentle but irresistible impulse towards a surrender of her will. Gone now was the feeling of criticism towards her husband, gone the wish that he could be strong as the other man was strong, gone everything, save a sense of guilt, a burning sense of shame and contrition for her infidelity and sin, a desire to be pure. Helpless and powerless, and crying in a whisper through lips that trembled with tears, "Save me, O Christ, save me!" she bowed her soul and remained weeping, conscious of miracle.

THE END

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